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© A volunteer at the West End Food Bank in Byker, Newcastle. Over 1.9 million people in Britain are now reliant on food handouts. Credit: Tessa Bunney


The rise of food charity in some of the most affluent countries is surely a sign that something has gone badly wrong. So why is this broken model being exported to the rest of the world? **Charlie Spring** investigates.

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When Leila arrived at the church hall, the last of the tins were being tidied away. It was her first food-bank visit, but she was late, after taking three buses to reach one that was open outside her work shifts. As parents wheeled in their prams for the playgroup, one woman noticed Leila's distress at the shame of having to ask for food, and pressed a £20 note (\$25) into her hand.

A week later I went to meet Leila. She told me she'd come to northern England from Pakistan to marry. When her husband died, she learned she and her two children were barred from accessing any state support. At first, she'd turned to friends and her mosque for help, and found low-paid work in a burger bar that she could do with her limited English. She took meals home, but the only halal option was fizzy drinks and fries, which she saved for her kids. The food bank was Leila's last resort.

Across the UK, emergency relief has become a lifeline to an ever-widening subset of society. Users range from people forced into destitution by immigration rules, to working families on low or insecure incomes, and those on benefits – including people with disabilities – that won't stretch. Although classified as a nation with a 'stable food supply', [a 2018 report](#) (<http://ukssd.co.uk/measuringup>) on the UK's progress against Sustainable Development Goal 2 ('Zero Hunger') warned that deep inequalities within the country mean it is 'struggling to address malnutrition'.

At first glance, food banks dishing out unsold food can look like a pragmatic ‘win-win’. But what began as ‘emergency’ stop-gaps have become a permanent fixture for millions across the rich world, begging urgent questions: How did so many people come to rely on food parcels? When did access to food become a matter for charity, rather than rights? And, as food banks start to crop up from Jordan to Guatemala, why are they being promoted as a solution to hunger across the world?

METEORIC GROWTH

© Donations at the West End food bank, in Byker Newcastle. Credit: Tessa Bunney

Food charity has seen explosive growth in demand and provision since Covid-19, but had been rising long before the pandemic. Food banks first emerged in the US but are now well established in Australia and Canada, as well as some Scandinavian countries, and have multiplied rapidly in the UK and other European countries in the past two decades. The US now has thousands of small-scale food-aid providers like the one Leila approached. Many are supplied by a highly developed network of major food banks.

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Despite compassionate volunteers’ best efforts to reduce stigma, people prefer to pawn possessions or compromise their housing before seeking charity

Inside cavernous warehouses, pallets are stacked high with giant boxes of food; walk-in freezers sit within fridges the size of houses and fleets of lorries line the loading bays. These purpose-built spaces have come a long way since the first food bank opened in Arizona in 1967. They require vast capital investment, with infrastructures that mirror Big Retail. Many major US food banks run operating budgets of several millions of dollars and Forbes listed Feeding America – a non-profit that feeds 46 million every year – as the country’s second-largest charity in 2019.

Janet Poppendieck locates the origins of US food aid in the Depression years in her ground-breaking 1998 book *Sweet Charity*. President Franklin D Roosevelt founded the Federal Surplus Relief Corporation in the 1930s, she notes, not only out of altruism but as a way to maintain the price of food commodities and avoid embarrassment after newspapers picked up on how baby hogs were being slaughtered to avoid market gluts at a time of visible destitution. This dynamic continues today, as the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) underwrites the channelling of food surpluses (<https://nin.tl/USDAexchange>) to charities at home and abroad. Throughout the Reagan era, welfare cutbacks and recession saw an explosion of ‘emergency’ food programmes across America. Fuelled by successive crises of capitalism and growing inequality, these ‘crisis solutions’ have become institutionalized.

For its part, the UK has long seen patchworked food assistance (<https://newint.org/features/2020/10/06/witness-hunger-food-poverty>), especially within faith communities. But food-bank provision rose steeply following the recession of 2008 and the austerity that followed. In 2011 major food-aid network The Trussell Trust reported nearly 130,000 instances of people receiving food. By 2015 this had jumped to 1.1 million and by March 2020, the annual figure sat at 1.9 million.

In recent years, the push to eradicate food waste – in and of itself a worthy aim – has boosted the food-charity cause further. Now a *cause célèbre* for charities, religious leaders and venture capitalists alike, it’s one of just a few environmental policies (<https://nin.tl/TrumpWaste>) to survive President Trump. As food banks persuasively claim to be ‘ending hunger’ and ‘fighting food waste’ in one fell swoop, expansion seems set to continue. But, amid the stampede, it seems like few have stopped to ask whether food banks really meet *either* of their stated goals.

In Britain, 'food bank' usually describes a place where someone experiencing hardship can access free food. The Trussell Trust is the biggest network, with over 400 food banks serving 1,200 smaller distribution points with food donated by shoppers and supermarkets.

There are also over 900 independent food banks, mapped by the Independent Food Aid Network.

In addition, food charity includes a diverse array of assistance, ranging from school breakfasts to 'social supermarkets' and meal-sharing schemes. Many of these initiatives receive food from FareShare. Originally set up as a partnership with supermarkets to divert surplus to improve the diets of homeless people, FareShare has expanded and now receives over 20 million kilograms of unsaleable food from major producers and retailers.

In North America, food banks resemble FareShare's model of warehouses redistributing food surpluses donated by major companies (plus government-purchased commodities). The US corporate foodbanking model is now being exported across the globe. FareShare is a member of the Chicago-based Global Foodbanking Network (GFN), which supports the operational development of food banks across the world, including in Ethiopia, El Salvador and India.

Sources: Annual Reports of FareShare, Feeding America, Global Foodbanking Network.

HUNGER PERSISTS

It turns out that, despite four decades of growth and formalization, corporate food banking is no closer to preventing hunger in North America. In 1995, the USDA reported 12 per cent of the US population as food insecure; the 2019 figure had dropped only slightly to 10.5 per cent.

In Canada, research has repeatedly shown that only [a small fraction \(https://nin.tl/Food-insecurity\)](https://nin.tl/Food-insecurity) of food-insecure households actually use food banks. Despite many compassionate volunteers' best efforts to reduce stigma, people prefer to pawn possessions or compromise their housing before seeking charity. Food aid is a gift, unlike government-backed entitlements such as adequate benefits or fair wages, which studies consistently show protect better against food insecurity. The biggest cause of hunger is inadequate income – not a lack of food.

On the question of waste reduction, food banks' refrigerated infrastructures do connect food corporations and community projects to allow for food sharing. But charity functions as a downstream means of governing food excesses rather than *preventing* overproduction in the first place.

As activist scholar Eric Holt-Giménez has pointed out, supermarkets regularly stock 50-100 per cent more food than customers can possibly buy. Surplus is caused not only by errors and accidents – as is commonly believed – but is a core component of mass consumption, a mechanism for speeding up efficiency, the flow of food commodities and thus profits. If waste is, in part, a by-product of profit-maximizing industrial food systems, charitable networks function as what Dan Warshawsky of Wright State University calls a 'corporate market correction mechanism'. No surprise then, that he observes that foodbanking is increasingly driven by the philanthropic wing of food corporations.

Andy Fisher, campaigner and author of *Big Hunger*, goes further. He believes food charity serves a '[hunger industrial complex \(https://nin.tl/HungerIndustrialComplex\)](https://nin.tl/HungerIndustrialComplex)' – of corporations, NGOs and government agencies – in which the task of soliciting and redistributing ever-greater quantities of food distracts from the systemic causes of hunger and fosters a perpetual cycle of charity.

In the US, Cargill, Kellogg's and Costco are among foodbanking's biggest donors. Corporate donors' reputations benefit from having their waste problem solved by an army of unpaid volunteers, and they get tax relief on their donations too. Meanwhile, low pay or the squeeze on suppliers caused by retailers goes unchallenged.

In the UK, this leads to situations where ASDA supermarket has invested \$25 million in Britain's biggest food-aid networks FareShare and the Trussell Trust, but still [fails to pay many of its own workers a living wage \(https://nin.tl/ASDAfoodpoverty\)](https://nin.tl/ASDAfoodpoverty).

Despite their inherent drawbacks, food banks have expanded unchecked. The Global Foodbanking Network (GFN) reports that its 943 members across Europe, Africa, the Middle East and Southeast Asia served 9.6 million people in 2018, a 23-per cent increase on the previous year. Warshawsky reports that food banks now exist in 80 countries worldwide.

GFN – whose corporate partners include Pepsico, Kellogg's and General Mills – are keen to expand into poorer countries that still lack the retail consolidation, infrastructure and food surplus that make food banks possible on the scale of North America. GFN would 'love to expand into India and Africa,' explains Warshawsky, as it views them as 'the frontiers of food insecurity'. These places also happen to be target growth regions for many of its corporate partners.

In a new twist, foodbanking organizations are starting to adopt the language of the 'Right to Food', seeking to assert themselves in high-level spaces like the UN and the Food and Agriculture Organization. 'They want to be tied to the next iteration of the Sustainable Development Goals,' Warshawsky tells me. 'That is how they are pitching what they are doing.'

Gareth Haysom from the African Centre for Cities at the University of Cape Town takes issue with the notion that industrial food is the best defence against hunger. In South Africa, food banks now exist in most provinces. Haysom puts this expansion down to government policy that neglects informal sectors and small farmers in favour of an 'accelerated' industrial food system, which has its roots in 'land dispossession, colonial labour systems, apartheid disenfranchisement and exclusion'.

Haysom is most concerned by the way food banks 'normalize' food poverty. This 'dilutes the political imperative' to address structural causes of hunger in a country where 80 per cent of households in poor communities are food insecure. Haysom's partners in the Hungry Cities Partnership point to [innovative city government policy](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02255189.2018.1442322) (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02255189.2018.1442322>) in Nanjing, China, which sees local fresh produce markets mandated and subsidized alongside new housing developments, making affordable and fresh food widely accessible. The result? 'Virtually no hunger' (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02255189.2018.1442322>).

African aid workers also express their dismay at the new traction for this retrograde version of food aid. 'We learned long ago that cash is more dignified than food – we fought for this for years,' says Salome Ntububa, Head of Global Humanitarian Response at international NGO Christian Aid. 'We know it's more effective – and it gives people choices, it changes lives.'

She was surprised to hear that a food bank had opened up in Goma, Democratic Republic of Congo, where she lives. 'They remind me of the "public restaurants" that politicians set up near markets during election campaigns,' she says. 'How is this targeted to the most vulnerable? Are they trying to provide quality or quantity? What's the exit strategy?'

The contradictions are not lost on foodbanking staff and volunteers. Many know that charity alone cannot solve the ecological and humanitarian crises driven by current food economies, yet the desire to help others is deep-rooted, especially in highly unequal societies. Food-aid providers are often those who know their communities (<https://newint.org/features/2020/10/06/witness-hunger-food-poverty>) and their needs best of all.

Increasingly, people are starting to speak out against sticking-plaster solutions. Closing The Hunger Gap – an alliance of food providers across North America – has developed a step-by-step ‘transformation checklist’ to guide projects from charity to a justice-focused approach. In the UK, following a 246-per-cent increase in food-parcel delivery, the Food Workers for Food Justice coalition formed in Scotland to protest that government ‘has been overly reliant on the voluntary sector for too long’. For its part, The Trussell Trust campaigns for a fairer and more generous welfare system, and calls for a world where food banks do not have to exist.

There are signs that the UK government may be taking some of the critiques on board. Sabine Goodwin (<https://nin.tl/Goodwin>) of the Independent Food Aid Network is encouraged that the latest report from the National Food Strategy at least recognizes that food poverty is caused by a lack of funds, not food. She is hopeful that this might encourage campaigners such as Manchester United’s Marcus Rashford – who suffered hunger as a child – to start pushing for solutions that get to the root of the problem, such as fair wages for supermarket staff.

While we work towards an exit strategy, emergency food will still be needed. Luckily the world has long been full of creative, challenging and dignified alternative ways to feed people – from the Black Panthers’ free breakfast programme to Food not Bombs. The growth of ‘social eating’ in the UK, where surplus food is used as a way to build community low-cost food pantries and ‘social supermarkets’ all offer ways to reduce stigma, as does mutual aid that positions itself as solidarity – such as the Community Kitchen Collective (<https://nin.tl/Journey>) that ladles out stew seasoned with scalded roast green chillies blended with lime, in the public parks of New Orleans.

Any transition to a world without food banks will require root-and-branch reforms: revaluing work throughout the food supply chain, from agricultural labour to supermarket staff; and redistributive policy – rather than corporate tax breaks – that builds government tax bases for welfare protection. The Black Lives Matter movement is surfacing demands for a deep analysis of who owns land and controls production and distribution.

These calls are not new. But they force us to consider whose interests are at stake in the global rollout of foodbanking and who is – and who should be – responsible for addressing food-system problems across the globe. We should not perpetuate hunger relief that relies on gifts of food rather than entitlements: delicious, nutritious food is everyone’s right.

Charlie Spring (https://twitter.com/eatingwaste?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor) is a researcher and campaigner for fairer food systems, currently based in Alberta, Canada.

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Action

FIAN International (<http://fian.org>): Right to Food advocates

The Global Solidarity Alliance for Food, Health and Social Justice (<https://nin.tl/GlobalAlliance>): Network of activist scholars with rich-world charity focus

IFAN (<http://foodaidnetwork.org.uk>): Independent food aid providers (UK)

Closing The Hunger Gap (<https://nin.tl/TransformationPlan>): US food bank network

Reading list

The Rise of Food Charity in Europe, Hannah Lambie-Mumford & Tiina Silvasti, Policy Press, 2020;

Feeding the Other: Whiteness, Privilege, and Neoliberal Stigma in Food Pantries, Rebecca de Souza, MIT Press, 2019;

Food Bank Nations: Poverty, Corporate Charity and the Right to Food, Graham Riches, Routledge, 2018;

'Broken Plate – State of the Nation's Food System (<https://nin.tl/BrokenPlate2020>)', Food Foundation (UK), September 2020

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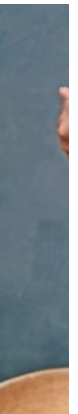
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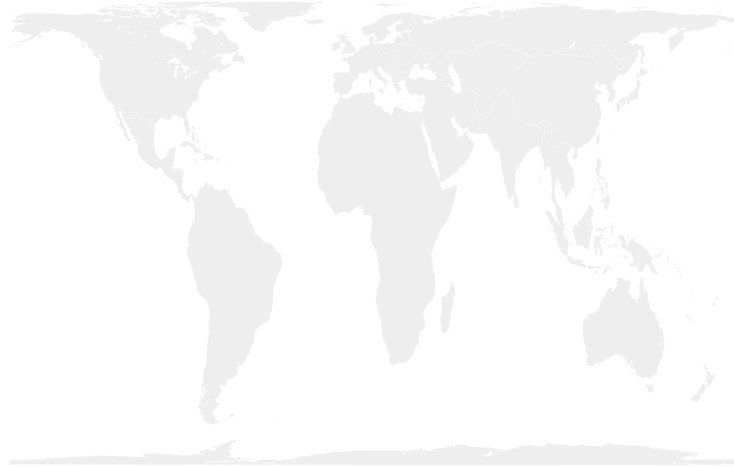
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