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Home / Opinion / Contributors

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OPINION

Why do we love food banks?

Food banks justify the capitalism that creates the poverty behind the inability to acquire food.

By Dennis Raphael

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Charitable food provision enables neo-liberal inspired austerity that drives the adverse public policies that create food insecurity in the first place, Dennis Raphael writes.

Cole Burston The Canadian Press file photo

Food banks are failures at solving food insecurity and hunger.

They reach only a small minority of food insecure people (about 20 to 25 per cent), stigmatize those who must use them (food bank clients experience shame and degradation), divert attention from governing authorities' failure to address food insecurity (failure to raise minimum wages or social assistance levels) and let businesses who provide poverty-level wages off the hook (some of the worse employers trumpet their donations to food banks). Food banks also serve as safety valves that channel public concern with food insecurity into what seems the virtuous feeding of the hungry.

Food banks justify the neo-liberal inspired capitalism that creates the poverty behind the inability to acquire food. Wolfgang Seibel, a professor of politics and public administration at the University of Konstanz in Germany, identified ineffective non-profit organizations such as food banks as “successful failures.” For Seibel, their failures to achieve their goals are overlooked as they are seen to be addressing a significant problem such that their failure to achieve these goals become cloaked in blissful ignorance by governing authorities and the public.

“They may symbolize problem-solving while solving nothing at all. They may pretend to be not just as efficient, but even more efficient than private or public institutions when it comes to the delivery of certain services while being definitely inefficient and unaccountable.”

Seibel argues: “The durability of these characteristics become easier to explain if we characterize ‘third sector’ organizations as providers of very special goods — symbols and allusions of problem-solving

that stabilize a given political system while actually problem non-solving — an organizational weakness is not an obstacle, but a prerequisite to their ability to provide the special services.”

Stephan Lorenz, a senior fellow at the Research Institute for Sustainability in Potsdam, applied these concepts to charitable food assistance in Germany.

“The analysis will show that collecting and distributing excess food is hardly the solution to the perceived social and ecological problems, and that the means employed are ambivalent in view of the proclaimed needs, especially since the organizations mainly avoid confronting the structural challenges faced,” he writes.

“Involved in benevolent behaviour and the display of charitable commitment, organizations cannot contribute to overcoming social exclusion and fighting excess. Such a contribution would require that they search for the reasons why poverty and exclusion have been growing along with affluence.

“They would have to name the parties and factors responsible for these developments and decide between possible and impossible alliances in fighting the trend. In so doing, they would avoid notice that collecting and distributing food is not a solution and at best an ambivalent means in this struggle.”

Daniel Ronson, food security researcher at the University of Cardiff, and Martin Caraher, professor of food and health policy at City University London, argue food banks are actually “shunting yards” serving a variety of purposes that have little to do with reducing food insecurity and hunger. Food banks, first of all, provide the assurance food insecurity is being addressed, thereby deluding the public that despite government failure to address this problem, it is being addressed by these charitable food agencies.

More importantly, charitable food provision is enabling current neo-liberal inspired austerity which drives the adverse public policies that create food insecurity in the first place. Food banks provide advantages for many while, at the same time, perpetuate food insecurity. Ronson and Caraher state:

“They might very well provide advantages for many — for those giving to food banks; and those volunteering; for those allowing collections to take place at their stores and offices; and for the churches who spend an increasingly large amount of time ensuring all those in need of being fed; for politicians who could utilize their existence for their own purposes; and for the public who can be reassured that they can maintain their standard of living while no one goes hungry.”

Ronson and Caraher ask as do we: “Is this the true role of food banks in society?”

Dennis Raphael is a professor at York University. This is adapted from the forthcoming volume “The Politics of Food Insecurity in Canada and the United Kingdom” edited by York University PhD student Zsofia Mendly-Zambo and Raphael.