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We don't want to manage poverty': community groups politicise food insecurity and charitable food donations

Abstract: Charitable assistance is a common response to food insecurity in many affluent countries. The coalition featured in this case study is explicitly concerned with social justice, mitigating the potential for charitable assistance to mask the extent of food insecurity, its root causes and its long-term consequences. The coalition structure has assisted community workers in transcending day-to-day routines, so as to reflect on the politics of food insecurity and institutionalised responses to this problem. Coalition members have defined food security as an objective whose achievement will entail comprehensive reform. One noteworthy outcome has been to recommend that member groups not redistribute a number of foodstuffs commonly donated by individuals and corporations. In grappling with a tension between responding to immediate needs for food and addressing the root causes of these needs, community workers have paid attention to public health.

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Introduction

In affluent countries, social inequalities persist and frequently affect health status (Macintyre 1997; Ross, Wolfson et al. 2000; Potvin, Lessard et al. 2002). In the United States (Poppendieck 1998) and Canada (Jacobs Starkey, Kuhnlein et al. 1998; Jacobs Starkey, Gray-Donald et al. 1999; Tarusuk and Beaton 1999; Jacobs Starkey and Kuhnlein 2000; McIntyre, Raine et al. 2001; Hamelin, Beaudry et al. 2002), charitable food assistance has become an institutionalized response to social inequality. Since the early 1980s, food banks have become as the main way of distributing emergency food assistance in Canada. Some of the supply distributed through food banks comes through individual donations, and some comes from corporate donations (Tarasuk and Eakin 2003 for further discussion). Besides food banks, 'collective kitchens'have also been established in many parts of Canada; many collective kitchens rely on donated ingredients and supplies (Tarasuk and Reynolds 1999; Racine and St-Onge 2000; Sabourin, Hurtubise et al. 2000; Edward and Evers 2001; Marquis, Thomson et al. 2001).

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Research on food insecurity in Canada has found that these prevailing responses to food insecurity tend to reproduce – not reduce – social disparities (Jacobs Starkey, Kuhnlein et al. 1998; Poppendieck 1998; Tarasuk and Reynolds 1999; McIntyre, Travers et al. 1999; Hamelin, Beaudry et al. 2002; McIntyre, Officer et al. 2003; Raine, McInytre et al. 2003; Williams, McIntyre et al. 2003). Moreover, a recent Canadian study suggests that reliance on food donations ultimately serves to obscure whether or not recipients'nutritional requirements are met. 'The only decision latitude [food bank] workers had,'this study found, 'was in deciding whether or not a particular food was fit for consumption. Given the limited supply, however, they appeared more likely to try to salvage food than discard it.'(Tarasuk and Eakin 2003: 1509)

The present article features a Canadian case study that provides a counterpoint to previous studies. Unlike these studies, it is not based on the analysis of the day-to-day activities involved in redistributing charitable food assistance. Instead, it features a coalition that is grappling with the problem of food insecurity. More specifically, it profiles a Montreal-based coalition's recent efforts to foster reflection among its members and in Quebec society at large about the nature, extent, causes and consequences of chronic food insecurity in their midst. This reflective process has led to the identification and promulgation of food security as an overarching social and public policy objective. The potential for charitable food assistance to mask the extent of food insecurity and its multiple root causes – a key finding of previous studies – appears to have been mitigated by this coalition's explicit concern for social justice. Indeed, a dual concern with hunger *and* social justice is reflected in the coalition's name: *la Table de concertation sur la faim et le développement social du Montréal metropolitan* (Taskforce on Hunger and Social Development for Metropolitan Montréal).

To deal with a tension between responding to immediate needs for food and addressing the social roots of these needs, community workers have given consideration to current and projected health disparities. The Taskforce has articulated a political vision in which equal access to life, to health, has become a crucible for deepening democracy (as per Appadurai 2002). One noteworthy outcome of this reflective process has been to recommend that member groups not redistribute a number of foodstuffs commonly donated by individuals and corporations. This Taskforce's position on unacceptable charitable food assistance has emerged through reflection on unequal living conditions and life chances.

Methods

This case study is based mainly on the analysis of more than fifty documents produced by Taskforce staff members, including meeting minutes, annual

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- charity
- Canada

reports and monthly newsletters. It is also informed by fieldnotes documenting observations made during five face-to-face and telephone encounters with key Taskforce members, observations made at three Taskforce meetings, and observations made at a workshop on food insecurity organized by the Taskforce in June 2003. Taskforce staff and its members are aware that I am a university-based researcher, and that I was attending their meetings and workshop in that capacity. The observations were made in the process of a negotiating a partnership between a university-based Chair in health promotion research and community organizations in Montreal, including the Taskforce. As rapport was still being built (Lecompte and Schensul 1999, 10-12) in a climate initially characterized by wariness and some distrust on the part of the Taskforce, it would have been premature to apply for formal ethics review. (Research currently underway with the Taskforce under the auspices of the Chair is part of a formal research protocol.) For ethical reasons and also to help verify the analysis, the Taskforce president read this text and approved it for publication. For ethical reasons and also in keeping with this article's focus on how Taskforce members have sought to politicize food security, the present article limits direct quotes to information placed deliberately in the public domain. The analysis of these public domain sources, however, has been informed by a comparison with the fieldnotes; this analytic technique obliges researchers to identify evidence supporting their conclusions, as well as evidence that could temper or refute the explanations being developed (Emerson, Fretz et al. 1995, 160; Lecompte and Schensul 1999, 75-78; Prior 2003, 160-161).

Table 1 Elements of a comprehensive food security policy

1. Agriculture

a. Production policies that respect the environment. Today, the right to produce and export as much as possible is upheld.

b. Policies that support organic production and that support democratic access to organic products.

c. Policies governing agro-food transformation that respect regional dynamics and differences. We are witnessing a concentration in large centres, to the disadvantage of those living in less densely populated regions.

d. Policies governing agro-food distribution that take regional disparities into account. The dictates of the market should be complemented by interventions to adjust for regional disparities. We are particularly thinking of populations in the far north.

2. Health

a. Policies to ensure that the population is informed about product quality and risks posed by innovations such as genetically-modified organisms;

b. Policies to ensure that charitable food distribution promotes health. Nutritional supplements should be included with emergency food provisions. It is insufficient and dangerous to simply count on corporation donations of surplus stock.

c. Population health promotion policies that address the effects of fast-food on the most fragile and vulnerable.

d. Policies providing free access to medication for the most fragile and vulnerable, some of whom must currently choose between food and medical treatment.

3. Education

a. Policies that take the organization of paid work and its consequences, including poor child nutrition and the loss of cooking skills. Such a policy approach could draw inspiration from certain European cities and regions, which have brought together decision-makers in a bid to improve lived experience among the citizenry.

4. Social Security

a. Adequate income security policies. The current formulas are inadequate and do not allow the most fragile and vulnerable to eat properly. A right to food supposes a right to eat and to feed one's family.

b. Housing security policies. The short supply of rental housing in cities and rental rates force impoverished people to cut back on food or to eat poorly. Access to affordable electricity and natural gas should be part of such as policy approach.

c. Policies that support the social inclusion of people with intellectual and other disabilities. The initiatives undertaken by civil society organizations should be supported and extended.

d. Family policies that take the organization of paid work into account. A public network of meals for school-aged children should be put into place where the need exists.

e. Funding policies for community organizations and coalitions. Current government programs often favour authoritarian responses and reduce community-based initiatives to providing services that the state does not want to or can no longer offer.

Source: Table de concertation sur la faim et le développement social du Montréal métropolitan. Une politique transversale. Colloque: La faim, problème politique: Pour une politique de sécurité alimentaire 2003. (Author's translation)

Findings

As an ensemble, the Taskforce documents analyzed for this study reveal a deeply felt tension between responding to immediate hunger with charitable food assistance, versus tackling the myriad ways in which hunger stems from social injustice. This tension accompanied the rise of food banks and related forms of charitable food assistance in Canada in the early 1980s, and it is reflected in the Taskforce's composition. By way of illustration of this heterogeneity, the more than seventy members of the Taskforce include a food bank on the scale of a warehouse that supplies to local food banks; local food banks where individual clients receive charitable food donations; a Catholic order whose mission is to offer assistance to all those in urgent need; an organization staffed by registered dieticians; organizations that have deliberately developed responses to food insecurity other than food banks, such as collective kitchens and food buying clubs. Some member organizations mainly serve Anglophones or Francophones descended from Europeans who migrated to Québec more than a hundred years ago, while other member organizations primarily serve recent immigrants.

At a Taskforce meeting held 14 January 2002, under the banner of «Paths toward a policy for community food security,» staff members circulated a text that had been adopted by its board on 23 February 1998, in which the existence across the Montreal region of emergency food assistance is decried (Bouchard, Ambeault et al. 2003). Emergency food assistance is not itself condemned, however. The text notes that emergency food assistance reflects compassion. Yet the bulk of the text presents arguments in favour of initiatives besides emergency food relief. Similarly, the January 2003 newsletter noted three generations in recent responses to food insecurity in the Montreal area: from emergency food relief in the context of the economic

Table 2 List of foods deemed unacceptable due to harmful long-term, medium-term or short-term effects

Food Products	Health Danger				Harmful re: culinary abilities	Harmful re: future purchase patterns
	Salubrity[1]	Obesity	Diabetes	Debatable		
Canned goods						
• Unidentified	■					
• Dented	■					
• Swollen	■					
• Rusty	■					
Fruits and vegetables						
• Rusty in colour	■					
• Putrid	■					
• Bruised	■					
• Mouldy	■					
• Rotten	■					
Past-date products	■					
Candy & sweets		■	■			■
Chocolate		■	■			■
Chips		■	■			■
Marmalade & commercial jellies		■	■			■
Cakes, cake mixes & bakery products (croissants, pastries, icing, etc.)		■	■			■
Ready-to-eat puddings		■	■			■
Sweetened breakfast cereals		■	■		■	■
Bars covered in chocolate, marshmallow, etc.		■	■		■	■
Diet products				■		
Popsicles & equivalents		■	■			
Beverages						
• Latte-type mix				■		■
• Sweet mix in powder form g, Kool-Aid		■	■			
• Punch or cocktail		■	■			
Powder mix to coat meat before roasting (e.g., Shake & Bake)				■	■	■
Shortening		■	■			■
Hydrogenated margarine		■	■			■
Battered fish-sticks		■	■		■	■
Cheese-type spread (e.g., CheezWhiz)			■		■	
Frozen dinners e.g, TV dinner				■	■	■
Packets or boxes of pasta with powder mix for sauce (e.g., Kraft Dinner, Lipton Sidekicks)				■	■	■
Sugar substitutes, diet products				■	■	■
Commercial salad dressings and mayonnaise		■	■	■	■	■

• Also any frozen food that has been unfrozen and then refrozen, as well as any donation whose nutritional value is debatable or that is offered with the objective, whether stated or not, of promoting a new product.
• This list may be discussed, lengthened or adapted according to the context, with an obligation to avoid harming those seeking help as the guiding criterion.

Source: Bouchard M, Ambeault S, Cournoyer F, Lachance T, Massicotte C, Paquette M, Ranti I, Roosevelt J-M. Nos interventions et l'innocuité alimentaire. Montréal: Comité sur l'innocuité, Table de concertation sur la faim et le développement social du Montréal métropolitan; 2003. (Adapted and translated by the author)

1. "Salubrité" in the original, which can be taken to mean clean and wholesome.

crisis experienced in the early 1980s; to the establishment of initiatives such as community kitchens and bulk buying clubs in response to recognition, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, of social exclusion among individuals and families experiencing food insecurity; to a growing realization that food security can only be realized through broad political, economic and social reform (Paiement 2003).

In 2002-2003, committees met regularly to reflect on food security and to develop policy proposals. The work of these committees culminated in a workshop held in June 2003, when these propositions were tabled and discussed further with a view to implementation. Table 1 summarizes these propositions.

The work of the committee on food safety (*comité sur l'innocuité alimentaire*) illustrates the scope of reflective process spearheaded by the Taskforce, and the emphasis placed on translating reflection into action. Until now, public health questions about food safety have focused mostly on spoilage. Indeed, storing perishable foods properly, checking vigilantly for spoilage, sanitization and respecting product 'best before'dates feature prominently in the guidelines endorsed by the Federal-Provincial-Territorial Commitee on Food Safety Policy for charitable food assistance in Canada (Federal-Provincial-Territorial Committee on Food Safety Policy 1999). The Taskforce's committee on food safety did address such concerns, but it interpreted the issue far more broadly.

Stating that the primary obligation in public health is to do no harm (Bouchard, Ambeault et al. 2003), they sought to take into account Canada's current socioeconomic and epidemiological profile, in which infectious diseases are less prominent than they once were, while chronic conditions such as type 2 diabetes and obesity are prominent, not least among people who have low incomes and have received little formal education. The committee expressed concern about the potential, over time, for members of socio-economically disadvantaged groups to lose culinary skills, and about purchasing patterns that could fuel public health problems such as diabetes and obesity in disadvantaged populations. For example, parents who receive cereal loaded with sugar from a food bank might be more inclined to buy this brand when they have the means to do so, the committee noted. The committee also noted that it is not necessary to suspect corporations of donating products as a form of publicity, but that it would be negligent to ignore the potential for donations to serve this purpose. The committee thus recommended that member groups refrain from distributing many types of food (see Table 2) that are regularly donated and distributed in Montreal food banks (Jacobs Starkey 1994). Several dieticians with academic appointments have endorsed their recommendations, as has the Professional Order of Dieticians of Quebec.

One indication of the deeply felt tension within the coalition between responding to immediate hunger versus tackling the roots of disparities through social development initiatives is how carefully this committee worded the written statement tabled in June 2003 at the Taskforce's workshop on food security. Therein the food safety committee acknowledged that consuming the foods hitherto not recommended for charitable distribution is not always or necessarily harmful. 'But,'the document continued (author's translation), 'the situation becomes quite different when these same foods are all that the people in difficulty, whom we want to help, have at their disposal'(Bouchard, Ambeault et al. 2003). The committee determined that certain food distribution practices might, in the aggregate, detract from a positive self-image and otherwise negatively affect future health status. 'It is not our responsibility to recycle anything and everything,'the committee declared, 'under the pretext that otherwise these products would go to waste.'(Bouchard, Ambeault et al. 2003).

In the final plenary session of the Taskforce's June 2003 workshop on food security (to which journalists were formally invited), the most striking theme to emerge focused on how public policies, socioeconomic circumstances and the organization of charitable food assistance make community workers into veritable managers of poverty. One participant approached the microphone and said that he worries that anti-poverty groups end up sliding into the management of poverty. 'We don't want to manage poverty,'this participant said succinctly, and to combat food insecurity, he called for income security. In the closing remarks for this workshop, the Taskforce president noted that 'the hardest thing'about working towards food insecurity today is to feel forced to become 'a manager of poverty.'And he said that the Taskforce and its members must refuse to take on the role of poverty manager.

Indeed, the Taskforce's board has adopted a very different position. A position paper adopted by the Taskforce about the appropriate response to hunger in Montreal reads (author's translation): 'The objective is not to, in effect, entrench enduring structures of dependence and poverty management.'(Bouchard, Ambeault et al. 2003) An abridged version of the Taskforce president's address to inaugurate the workshop, which was published on the front page of a Montreal daily newspaper (see Paiement 2003) also emphasized that hunger is inherently political, and that food security needs to be an overarching policy objective.

Discussion

Previous research on emergency food assistance has pointed to the deeply-rooted character of poverty in the contemporary period, of which food insecurity forms part (Jacobs Starkey, Kuhnlein et al. 1998; Poppendieck 1998; Jacobs Starkey, Gray-Donald et al. 1999; Tarasuk and Reynolds 1999; Tarusuk and Beaton 1999; Jacobs Starkey and Kuhnlein 2000; Sabourin, Hurtubise et al. 2000; Jacobs Starkey, Johnson-Down et al. 2001; Tarasuk and Eakin 2003). With the institutionalization of charitable food assistance, it has been suggested that community groups may unwittingly become part of the problem. Reliance on donations means that the supply available for distribution is limited, variable and largely beyond the control of the community groups that provide food assistance. Preoccupied with 'the problem of supply,'paid staff and volunteers may pay less attention to 'the problem of demand'(Tarasuk and Eakin 2003).

While previous research has usefully documented the day-to-day dimensions of charitable food assistance in Canada,

from quantifying what is donated to documenting how donations are distributed and received, this case study has focused attention on a coalition. Coalition-building can be critically important, this case study suggests, for such activities can provide an opportunity for workers and recipients to think critically about the roots, day-to-day dimensions and long-term implications of charitable food assistance. The present study suggests that, in Montréal at least, community workers are well aware that a limited and unpredictable supply of donated food combined with chronic demand can lead them to become veritable 'managers of poverty.' To improve the overall prospects of disadvantaged populations, the coalition profiled in this article has underscored the importance of public policy and other forms of social development. They are moving in the direction of a broad understanding of food security and intersectoral collaboration, in the name of deeper democracy and more meaningful citizenship (Webb, Hawe et al. 2001; Appadurai 2002). Through participation in a coalition, they remind each other about unmet needs and demands that might otherwise remain invisible within their respective organizations, and more broadly in society. These unmet needs include adequate nutrition for all on a day-to-day basis, which is a cornerstone of public health.

Considering the politics of food insecurity has led to questioning the practice of distributing charitable food donations, to the point of recommending that many common donations be refused. Recall, by contrast, that food bank workers in Southern Ontario seem to feel obliged to distribute any and all kinds of donated food products, in any amounts, if these products could serve to abate the immediate sensation of hunger (Tarasuk and Eakin 2003: 1509). Given the present study's reliance on documents placed deliberately in the public domain, it has not been possible to chronicle debates within the Taskforce regarding the recommendation to cease distributing the foods outlined in Table 2. And it is not possible to report on whether member groups – and ultimately food recipients – are willing to manage with less food in the short term, in order to work towards the achievement of the long-term objectives adopted by the Taskforce. Such questions should be addressed through future research.

Taskforce staff members readily acknowledge that the amount of food given as emergency relief is not sufficient, on its own, to cause health problems such as type 2 diabetes. But it is clear from their documents that they question the wisdom of redistributing emergency food supplies that depart from recommended dietary guidelines, especially when it is known that food bank users tend not to have optimal diets on a day-to-day basis (Jacobs Starkey 1994; Jacobs Starkey, Gray-Donald et al. 1999; Jacobs Starkey and Kuhnlein 2000). They also are concerned about the lived experience of food insecurity, which in the contemporary period in the province of Québec encompasses the lived experience of accepting and partly subsisting on charitable food assistance. Research conducted in the province of Quebec has underlined dietary monotony, feelings of alienation, and the importance of paying close attention to the emotional reactions engendered by food insecurity (Hamelin, Beaudry et al. 2002). Taskforce documents manifest concern for all of these facets of food insecurity.

It is precisely because emergency food relief constitutes something like a drop in the dietary bucket, in disease causation terms, that the Taskforce's internal reflections and its public advocacy have dealt with what is not appropriate for charitable redistribution. The Taskforce is advocating for an expansive political vision, one in which emergency food distribution would be unnecessary because health-promoting conditions would be in place and available equally to all. The rationale for refusing to redistribute donations deemed inappropriate is tightly linked to refusing to manage poverty, and instead seeking to strengthen advocacy and other social development efforts. Adopting a formal policy on unacceptable food redistribution is meant to call attention to inappropriate donation practices, on the part of corporations and also the general public. The bodies of the poor are not to be used, from the Taskforce's perspective, as so many recycling bins.

A key finding of this study is that public health considerations proved crucial to the coalition's efforts to reflect critically on the problem of food insecurity. Yet knowledge about public health problems such as type 2 diabetes was unevenly spread among coalition members. The acquisition and sharing of health knowledge, especially epidemiological knowledge, proved crucial for building consensus about the importance of curbing the expression of social inequality in health disparities. Community-based groups concerned with hunger, this study thus suggests, should be sought out more often as partners in public health education and health promotion. Not only are such groups eager to refine their knowledge about public health problems, they can also apply this knowledge through changes to practice and in advocacy efforts.

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