Serving Us Rights: Securing the Right to Food in Canada

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Abstract

Canada has consistently failed to uphold basic human rights, including the right to food. This has caused widespread and persistent household food insecurity (HFI), which has become a serious, albeit overlooked, public health concern. Working from a political economic perspective, this article situates HFI within the context of poverty that has been made worse by neoliberal "rollbacks" to the welfare state. The majority of community and policy responses to HFI focus on the increased production or redistribution of food via food charity, neglecting the underlying issue of inadequate income. These responses may even perpetuate food insecurity by offloading safety net functions onto corporations and communities that cannot compensate for adequate welfare programs. In order to meaningfully address food insecurity as an issue rooted in poverty, we recommend policy interventions under the "right to food" framework, which places primary responsibility on the state. But unlike traditional legal conceptions of the right to food, we emphasize its utility as a tool for mobilizing civil society, which is a powerful yet underutilized source of accountability to state obligations. This approach therefore combines political action with policymaking, and civil society with the state, in the collective realization of the right to food.

Keywords: household food insecurity, human rights, income, right to food, social policy

Résumé

Le Canada manque continuellement de maintenir les droits de la personne fondamentaux, y compris le droit à l'alimentation. Cela a causé une insécurité alimentaire des ménages (IAS) généralisée et persistante, qui est devenue un problème de santé publique grave, quoique négligé. Dans une optique politico-économique, cet article situe l'IAS dans un contexte de pauvreté aggravée par les « réductions » néolibérales de l'État-providence. La majorité des réponses communautaires et politiques à l'IAS se concentrent sur l'augmentation de la production ou la redistribution de la nourriture à travers l'aide alimentaire, négligeant le problème sous-jacent des revenus insuffisants. Ces réponses peuvent même perpétuer l'insécurité alimentaire en déléguant les fonctions essentielles aux entreprises et aux communautés qui ne peuvent pas pallier le manque des programmes de protection sociale. Afin d'aborder de manière significative l'insécurité alimentaire en tant que problème enraciné dans la pauvreté, nous recommandons des interventions politiques dans le cadre du « droit à l'alimentation », qui place la responsabilité principale sur l'État. Mais contrairement aux conceptions juridiques traditionnelles du droit à l'alimentation, nous soulignons son utilité en tant qu'outil de mobilisation de la société civile, qui est une source puissante, mais sous-utilisée de responsabilité envers les obligations de l'État. Cette approche réunit donc l'action politique avec l'élaboration des politiques et la société civile avec l'État dans la réalisation collective du droit à l'alimentation.

Mots clés : insécurités alimentaires des ménages, droits de la personne, revenu, droit à l'alimentation, politique sociale

Introduction

Human Rights or Self-Righteousness?

On the global stage, Canada fancies itself a “champion” of human rights (Government of Canada 2020). It boasts of ratifying seven major international human rights conventions, including the International Covenant on Economic and Social Rights (ICESR), in which Article 11 describes the “right...to an adequate standard of living...including adequate food, clothing, and housing” (ICESR 1999). This statement underscores the most basic of human necessities, and, given their privation in a wealthy nation, highlights one of the most profound failures in Canadian social policy. Canada’s shameful domestic record does not match its self-proclaimed leadership role in advancing human rights worldwide.

It is not difficult to see through the cant, if only Canadians paid attention. The federal government’s broken commitments lie in plain sight, as notoriously exemplified by Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside. In the world’s 13th most industrialized country (UNDP 2019), in what is supposedly its “most liveable city” (*The Economist* 2019) in a neighbourhood adjacent to tourist landmarks, one will find a concentration of shelters, soup kitchens, and bread lines (Riches & Graves, 2007). The public is divided into two camps - those who stigmatize these services and others who commend their altruism, with neither side recognizing the broader, more longstanding, structural forces that made them necessary.

In this article, we argue that reliance on food aid is unacceptable, not because of the people who rely on it, but because the government has neglected their basic rights, which has left communities struggling to provide for their needs. Consider that community services are not so much solutions as they are signs of perpetual emergency – accentuated, no less, by the Downtown Eastside’s constant shriek of sirens. At first, they are jarring to the ears; eventually, they become white noise.

A Food Insecure State

While normalized domestically, the Canadian government’s violation of the right to food has begun to attract overdue international attention. In 2012, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Olivier De Schutter, led an envoy to Canada, his first to an affluent, industrialized country. During his visit, he condemned the country’s state of food insecurity, remarking that “it’s even more shocking…to see that there are 900,000 households in Canada that are food insecure and up to 2.5 million people precisely because this is a wealthy country. It’s even less excusable” (*Postmedia News,* 2012).

Despite moral outrage, these numbers still vastly underrepresent the magnitude of household food insecurity, commonly defined in Canada as “the inadequate or insecure access to sufficient food because of financial constraints” (Dachner & Tarasuk, 2018). The aforementioned statistics only reflect food bank usage data, which actually underestimates food insecurity rates as reported in national nutrition surveillance data by 4-5 times (Loopstra & Tarasuk, 2015). In the 2017-18 cycle of the Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS), in which all provinces participated[1] in the Household Food Insecurity Module (HFIM) that is used to measure the prevalence and severity of food insecurity in Canada, some degree of food insecurity was reported to affect 12.7% of households, amounting to 4.4 million Canadians (Tarasuk & Mitchell, 2020). Nevertheless, De Schutter's visit precipitated a UN report that highlighted the renewed urgency of food insecurity in the Global North, where it has been a persistent, yet overlooked, public health concern (De Schutter, 2012). HFI is closely associated with poor physical, mental, and social health outcomes such as chronic disease, depression, social isolation, and premature death (Bhargava et al., 2012; Black et al., 2012; Bronte-Tinkew et al., 2007; Davison et al., 2015; Men et al., 2020; Seligman et al., 2010; Seligman & Schillinger, 2010; Tarasuk et al., 2013; Vozoris & Tarasuk, 2003). That people are dying of food scarcity in one of the world's wealthiest nations is a disgrace; that the deficiency lies within the food supply is a disguise.

While the urgency of reducing food insecurity is widely accepted, its framing narratives are more contested. De Schutter (2012) rightly portrays HFI amid economic inequality, a context that has been obscured by popular discourses that emphasize the local production and/or charitable distribution of food. Local food movement discourses inaccurately frame food insecurity as a problem arising from the food system as opposed to labour and welfare systems at large. Even worse, food charity discourses suggest that the redistribution of surplus food is a suitable response to this problem. Charitable initiatives not only deliver negligible impacts on food insecurity outcomes (Tarasuk, 2017; Loopstra, 2018), along with negative implications for personal dignity and agency, but they also inappropriately use one symptom of neoliberalism, which is a wasteful food system, to superficially treat another, which is an inadequate social safety net (Riches, 2018). Such lack of discursive clarity occurs in part because these frameworks respond to the broader concept of food security, to which food *in*security, as defined in population health research (e.g., CCHS), does not represent a direct antonym. Their respective primary concerns about food supply and economic access to food, while equally important, are in fact minimally related in most urban regions within the Global North (Power, 1999; Tarasuk, 2001a).

Although food security, by definition, "exists when 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 of the United Nations [FAO], 1996), the term in food security literature generally connotes the scale of food supply at national and community levels. As a result, the emphasis placed on sustainable food systems tends to obscure issues of economic access to food. It is worth noting that food insecurity in 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 lack of food affordability due to distance from markets, an ineffective federal food subsidy program (Nutrition North Canada), diminishing access to traditional foods, not to mention the imperative of decolonization (Dachner & Tarasuk, 2018). Even in these environments, however, financial resources are essential for accessing food through market or traditional channels, which returns to the central problem of inadequate income (Pirkle et al., 2014). In regions with a secure supply of food, food insecurity typically occurs at the household level, where the condition is primarily caused by inadequate income resulting from deficient social policy (Riches & Tarasuk, 2014; Tarasuk, 2001b).

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[1] This cycle represents complete national data that can be compared longitudinally to other years with full participation. The HFIM is optional in alternate cycles of the CCHS, including 2015–2016.

This is the case in wealthy nations such as Canada, where weakening income-based policies have been superficially substituted by food redistribution and production initiatives. To distinguish between these approaches, we return to Dachner and Tarasuk's (2018, p. 230) definition of food insecurity as "the inadequate or insecure access to sufficient food because of financial constraints." Further to this conceptualization, we utilize Riches & Silvasti's (2014) interpretation of food security as the absence of need for food banks, soup kitchens, breadlines, and dumpster diving. Paradoxically, these activities represent features of community food security, on the one hand, and widespread household food insecurity on the other. The present argument focuses on the latter issue, which is rooted in the structural problem of income inequality.

Political Economy

Among income-based conceptualizations of food insecurity, political economy is the only theoretical framework that addresses both the social and ideological context of HFI (Mendly-Zambo & Raphael, 2019). Although the political economy of food and related structural frameworks are well-established in existing literature (Bernstein, 2016; Friedmann, 1993; 2012), the political economy of HFI is largely underdeveloped with the exception of Graham Riches' (1986; 1997; 2002; 2011; 2018) pioneering work in this field. From his perspective, the institutional entrenchment of corporate charity has largely contributed to the decline of social policy in wealthy "food bank nations."

In addition to Riches's work, this paper's theoretical approach also derives from Fisher's (2017) indictment of corporate involvement in the anti-hunger movement, Tarasuk's (Tarasuk, 2001a; 2001b; 2017; Tarasuk & Beaton, 1999; Tarasuk, Dachner, & Loopstra, 2014; Tarasuk & Eakin, 2005; Tarasuk, Mitchell, & Dachner, 2014; 2016) extensive work on the social determinants of food insecurity, and Lightman and Lightman's (2017) institutionalist critique of Canadian social policy more generally. According to their analyses, HFI is a direct result of neoliberal policies, mainly related to rollbacks in social welfare, that have had deep consequences for the ability of households to afford basic necessities such as food.

Building upon this perspective, the present article situates the causes and solutions to HFI – as a matter of income rather than food – in Canadian public policy. First, we establish the context and politics of HFI using political economic theory. From this vantage point, we then critique current policy responses to HFI, including the lack of such policies. Using secondary sources to build our argument, we review literature on dominant food insecurity frameworks identified by Mendly-Zambo and Raphael (2019), queried using relevant search terms such as "food insecurity," "right to food," "food banks," and "community food programs," and then selected based on their relevance in the contemporary (2010–2020) Canadian context. Finally, we develop recommendations for upholding the right to food through multiple sectors of society, albeit with the majority of responsibility assigned to its primary duty bearer: the state.

The Political Economy of Household Food Insecurity: The Rise and Fall of the Canadian Welfare State

Given the inextricable link between income and food, we must first look to macro-scale processes that have produced income inequality and, consequently, contributed to food insecurity. Contrary to the capitalist myth of market self-regulation, the vagaries of economics are not naturally occurring, but are the result of interventions that are intrinsically political. Widespread inequality was not always the status quo; nor should it continue to be.

Between the Second World War and the mid-1970s, income inequality in Canada decreased in large part due to the development of a robust Canadian social security system (Power, 1999), following the creation of its British counterpart in 1945 (Lightman & Lightman, 2017). These interventions were heavily influenced by the work of John Maynard Keynes, who proposed social spending to offset declines in the economy, and Lord William Beveridge, who emphasized the government's leadership role in meeting the collective needs of society through social programs (Lightman & Lightman, 2017). Their ideas did not take hold to the same extent in the United States, which retained the Victorian "Poor Laws"-era preference for social assistance programs that are charitable and conditional rather than public and universal (Myles, 1998). Implicit in the latter model is recognition for citizenship entitlements that are now understood, but not necessarily upheld, as human rights.

Post-war support for the welfare state was arguably born of collective memory of the Great Depression, wartime egalitarian ideals, and consensus between labour and capital (Lightman & Lightman, 2017). Although food banks appear to be permanent fixtures of society today, we tend to forget that they were virtually nonexistent in Canada between the Great Depression and the 1980s (Power,1999), during which they were unnecessary due to functional social policy. The subsequent proliferation of food banks (to be discussed later in this article), beginning with the United States, and then spreading across industrialized nations (Fisher 2017; Riches 2018), thus points to the ensuing decline and corporate capture of social welfare.

The oil crisis of 1973 represents a watershed event that shifted political priorities from social welfare to economic growth; from Keynesianism to neoliberalism; from human rights to corporate interests. Ever since, Canadian social spending has retreated to levels that are among the lowest in the industrialized world , ranking 25th in social expenditures as a percentage of GDP out of 37 OECD nations (OECD, 2019b). This marks a convergence with the American welfare model, characterized by market responses to basic entitlements (Myles, 1998), from which Canada has historically distinguished itself. Over the past several decades, neoliberalism has guided Canadian policies towards financial deregulation, free trade, minimized government involvement, and reduced taxation at the expense of adequate wages, secure employment, and social assistance programs that respond to citizens' financial, health, and social needs – food being among the most basic of these (Riches & Tarasuk, 2014).

Altogether, household food insecurity (HFI) is predominantly a function of income instability and insecurity, and secondarily influenced by access to savings and assets, chief among them home ownership, as well as costs of living (Dachner & Tarasuk, 2018). The inextricable link between financial resources and food insecurity is well understood, with proven historical and contemporary solutions in income policies (Procyk, 2014; Emery et al., 2013; Tarasuk, 2017). The majority of responses to HFI at present, however, focus on the increased production of food within communities and the redistribution of food via corporate charities and the nonprofit sector, a preference that is politically motivated. In the following section, we compare these competing approaches to HFI reduction.

Comparing Apples to Oranges: Food- and Income-based Responses to Household Food Insecurity

Food-based Community Responses

Efficacy

The present article questions the efficacy and suitability of food-based responses to HFI which are typically undertaken by communities. Contrary to popular perception, Tarasuk (2017) and Loopstra (2018) report that there is no evidence to suggest that community food initiatives reduce HFI. Studies thus far, while limited, have only indicated the contrary: that they grant marginal relief to a small subset of the population without improving dietary outcomes at the community level (Loopstra, 2018). Less than one-quarter of food insecure Canadians use food banks (Loopstra & Tarasuk, 2015), and, of these individuals, 70% of participants in Tarasuk and Beaton's (1999) study reported severe food insecurity despite regular food bank usage. More recently, Tarasuk et al. (2019) found that food bank use was one of the least utilized strategies for augmenting household resources, with a meagre 21.1% of severely food insecure households reporting food bank use.

Lack of efficacy applies not only to food banks intended for emergency relief, but also to initiatives focused on community capacity building (e.g. community gardens and kitchens) – perhaps even more so due to their smaller scale. Although studies of community kitchens (characterized by educational cooking activities) have demonstrated increases in access to healthy food among participants (Iacovou et al., 2013), these benefits tend to be tenuous due to precarious funding, staff availability, and program schedules (Engler-Stringer & Berenbaum, 2007; Loopstra, 2018). In a study of healthy "good food box" programs, food insecurity among participants remained unchanged after an eight-month period (Miewald et al., 2012). Increases to food insecurity for program dropouts may have been more indicative of declining socio-economic circumstances than they were of program efficacy (Loopstra, 2018). This finding suggests that even if community food initiatives succeeded in improving food insecurity outcomes, as they certainly do for other objectives such as social connectivity, participation would still depend on social circumstances of households and on the capacity of community-based organizations to provide childcare, transportation, and other social supports. Improvements to household circumstances tend to require structural interventions beyond the domain of communities, particularly those with limited resources.

Suitability

Although the impetus towards increasing capacity, empathy, food quality, and inclusivity may improve both charitable and capacity-building services, these measures still fail to address the structural source of HFI, which is a malfunctioning welfare state – not an insufficient food system. Ultimately, people are food insecure not because they lack access to food programs, affordable food retail, or food skills, but because they do not have enough money to purchase sufficient, healthy food (Tarasuk, 2017; Huisken & Tarasuk, 2017). If HFI is defined as the "[inadequate] access to the variety or quantity of food that they need due to *lack of money*" (Statistics Canada, 2015, italics added) or "the inadequate or insecure access to sufficient food because of *financial constraints*" (Dachner & Tarasuk, 2018, italics added), then food programs do nothing to improve the financial circumstances underpinning this condition.

Charitable food initiatives not only fail to redress, but may even reinforce, political economic structures that produce HFI. If the goal is to truly eliminate HFI, then the aim should be to make the demand for food banks obsolete (Fisher, 2017; Riches, 2018). Instead, the food bank system has focused on expanding operations and increasing supply, which has the counterproductive effect of placating urgency for social assistance reform. In other words, food banks are primarily concerned with "feeding the need," thereby reinforcing social dependency on food banks instead of "shortening the line" which would reduce the need for food banks (Fisher, 2017). This occurs because there are stakeholders, namely corporations and neoliberal governments, with vested interests in maintaining public reliance on the charitable sector.

The irony of the food bank model is that it relies on donations from corporations (e.g., Walmart) that do not pay their employees living wages, which is a significant contributor to HFI (Fisher, 2017; Riches, 2018). Due to their extensive control, food charity discourses portray corporate donors as part of the solution to hunger without holding them accountable for their role in creating HFI through exploitative labour practices. For these entities, food bank donations are a relatively cost-effective method of cloaking culpability for HFI under a banner of social and environmental responsibility, with the added benefits of tax credits and the convenience of disposing food waste (Riches, 2018; Fisher, 2017; Suschnigg, 2012).

Meanwhile, senior governments indirectly support food charity through donations, the provision of tax credits, and supportive policies in order to offload HFI action onto communities as well as the corporate sector which is a beneficiary of this arrangement (Tarasuk, Dachner, & Loopstra, 2014; McIntyre, Patterson, Anderson, & Mah, 2016). In 2017, the BC government, for instance, contributed $10 million to Food Banks BC to expand refrigeration capacity in lieu of developing an anti-poverty strategy which they did not create until 2019 (Government of British

Columbia, 2017; Mendly-Zambo & Raphael, 2019). In Nova Scotia, which has the 4th highest rate of food insecurity (Tarasuk & Mitchell, 2020) and the 4th lowest minimum wage in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2020b), the provincial government provides tax credits to farmers in return for food bank donations (Government of Nova Scotia, 2016). These policies parallel American institutional arrangements that gave rise to the simultaneous retrenchment of welfare programs and entrenchment of food banks, particularly through a United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) emergency food purchasing scheme (The Emergency Food Assistance Program) that was designed to alleviate economic crises caused by agricultural overproduction (Lohnes 2020).

Tellingly, rates of HFI have only worsened over nearly 40 years of food banking and several decades of emerging community-based food initiatives in Canada (Riches & Tarasuk, 2014). Even with the provision of healthy food in some initiatives, these programs still restrict choice and autonomy due to their clientele's lack of purchasing power. In this regard, food-based initiatives – even those operating with best practices – only represent superficial, "top-soil" responses that bury deep-rooted structures that promote and perpetuate income inequality.

Food Policy Responses

Owing to their political and public popularity, food-based approaches have gained influence in the policy arena just as income-based approaches have declined. In cities, food strategies that function as roadmaps for local food policies and initiatives have become popular with municipal authorities worldwide (Sonnino, 2016). While significant for purposes of sustainability and community development, these documents carry limited utility for HFI reduction because they focus on the production/distribution of food rather than the financial means to purchase it. This is partly by nature of jurisdiction since income policies, unlike local food policies, lie largely beyond municipal control (Mah & Thang, 2013; Collins et al., 2014). Relative to social policy advocacy, charitable initiatives also represent a visible sign of action that delivers resources immediately, however inadequately or ineffectively.

At the federal level, the newly-unveiled Food Policy for Canada similarly sidesteps issues of poverty, notably ignoring Food Secure Canada's (2017) recommendation of creating an income floor to ensure that all Canadians can afford food. Despite emphasizing the need to improve access to food, particularly for "the poor and people in vulnerable situations," the national food policy received criticism for its lack of acknowledgement for income interventions (Government of Canada, 2019). Instead, it focuses on community food initiatives for which the federal government pledged $50 million to local food infrastructure "primarily for the less privileged" (Government of Canada, 2019). Even according to an executive of FoodShare Toronto, which runs community food programs, "this is not how we respond to a crisis like food insecurity," which is an issue that is "largely around income" (Hui, 2019). In McIntyre and Anderson's (2016, p. 33) words, "the only way to eliminate household food insecurity in Canada is to ensure that every individual has access to an adequate income."

Whether the cost of food rises or falls, a variable potentially affected by food policy, the overriding determinant of HFI is income. In Canada, the cost of food is already low relative to other countries (Black, 2015), whereas rates of poverty and income inequality are higher than in other industrialized countries with stronger systems of social support (Raphael et al., 2018). According to the USDA (2019), Canadian consumers spend, on average, 9.1% of household income on food – the fifth lowest rate among 104 countries surveyed. Yet out of 36 OECD countries with available data in 2016, Canada ranked 24th in social welfare expenditures as a percentage of national GDP (OECD, 2019b). This may explain why Canada's relative income poverty measure (0.12 in 2016), which describes the share of the population with an income of less than 50% of the national median income, has been consistently higher than that of countries with higher levels of social spending, such as Finland (0.06), Sweden (0.09), Denmark (0.06), Norway (0.08), Belgium (0.1), France (0.08), Germany (0.1), and the Netherlands (0.08) (OECD 2019a). Similarly, Canada's GINI coefficient (0.307), which measures income inequality, is larger than that of all aforementioned countries. Given Canada's relatively low cost of food, and high rates of poverty, policies pertaining to income hold more relevance to HFI reduction than those organized around the food system, such as funding for local food infrastructure.

Income Policy Responses

Income-based responses, the domain of provincial and federal governments, have consistently proven to be much more effective than food-based initiatives, which tend to occur at the community level (Loopstra, 2018). Income supports afforded to Canadian seniors, which essentially provide them with a guaranteed basic income, represent an exemplar for HFI reduction in the social determinants of health (SDH) literature (Emery et al., 2013a; McIntyre, Dutton, Kwok, & Emery, 2016; Dachner & Tarasuk, 2018; Tarasuk, 2017). To illustrate, the risk of HFI among individuals on income assistance drops by nearly 50% when Canadians reach pension age, at which point they are eligible for Guaranteed Income Supplement and Old Age Security payments. When combined, these provide more than double the income of individuals on provincial welfare in most cases (McIntyre, Dutton, Kwok, & Emery, 2016; Dachner & Tarasuk, 2018).

A notable example of policy solutions at the provincial level is Newfoundland and Labrador's implementation of a poverty reduction strategy in 2006, which nearly halved the incidence of HFI among social assistance (Income Support) recipients between 2007 and 2012 (Loopstra et al., 2015). This plan included the following measures: improvements to Income Support rates, which were increased and indexed to the cost of living; the facilitation of employment among Income Support recipients through cash transfers and the retention of benefits for the first month of employment; and the reduction in costs of living through affordable housing policies, extended prescription coverage, enhanced childcare support, and decreased taxation for low-income households (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2006; 2014). In addition to social services, the poverty reduction plan also addressed inadequate employment income by raising the minimum wage from $6 in 2006 to $10 in 2010. In recent years, however, the rollback and neglect of such policies has led to the province currently having the second lowest minimum wage in Canada (Government of Canada, 2020), and not surprisingly, the 3rd highest rate of food insecurity (15.9%) (Tarasuk & Mitchell, 2020).

The present commentary takes place amid incipient policy action against poverty and HFI, with several recent developments pertaining to these matters. In 2018, the federal government released Canada's first Poverty Reduction Strategy, which set poverty reduction targets of 20% by 2020, and 50% by 2030, relative to 2015 levels. If these goals are to be met, they would certainly have a large impact on HFI reduction. Although the outcomes of this strategy remain to be seen, the establishment of HFI rates as an indicator for poverty reduction progress, albeit with no proposed reduction benchmarks, at least represents recognition of the problem (Government of Canada, 2018). British Columbia then unveiled its own poverty reduction strategy in 2019, the first of its kind in the province, with a reduction target of 25% by 2024. While the federal and provincial strategies represent important initial steps towards poverty reduction, they are far from comprehensive, and are notably vague about food insecurity specifically. Critics of BC's Poverty Reduction Strategy argue that it introduces few new interventions beyond ones that have been deemed insufficient thus far. The upcoming minimum wage increase to $15.20/hour, for instance, still falls below the living wage required to live in the Vancouver region, which was estimated to be $20.91/hour (Ivanova et al., 2018). Moreover, meagre increases of $100/month in 2017 and $50/month in 2019 to both Income Assistance and Disability Assistance rates fail to compensate for a decade-long freeze in rates between 2007 and 2017 (Robinson, 2019). These increased rates respectively leave income and disability payments at 50% ($760/month) and 65% ($1235/month) of the Market Basket Measure, which is the federal and BC provincial poverty line measure (Ivanova & Hemingway, 2019). Other than the 2019 hike in income and disability assistance, the BC Poverty Reduction Strategy, as with poverty reduction approaches in most other provinces, has not pledged additional increases to these rates, which remain inadequate for covering basic needs, including food and shelter, let alone for living a dignified life.

As mentioned previously, both federal and provincial poverty reduction strategies prioritize members of the "deserving poor," such as children and families, over their "undeserving" counterparts, which includes individuals who are unable to participate in the labour force due to physical and mental challenges. This selective approach was ineffective in Ontario, where the prevalence of HFI remained stable over the past decade despite the rollout of its own poverty reduction strategy. Tarasuk (2017) attributes its lack of success to the focus on households with children, which excludes a large proportion of other households similarly experiencing food insecurity. However, Brown and Tarasuk (2019) found that rates of severe food insecurity decreased by one-third among low-income families following the introduction of the Canadian Child Benefit in 2016, demonstrating the powerful impact of policy decisions that improve, even modestly, the economic circumstances of households. These results provide the rationale for extending similar policy interventions to other sectors of society, or better, all who are food insecure.

One limitation of existing interventions – such as increases to the minimum wage, social assistance rates, and affordable housing – is their piecemeal approach which targets specific population groups individually and inequitably (Tarasuk, 2017), with a bias towards the "deserving poor." Since the common denominator among a diverse food insecure population is inadequate income, a Basic Income Guarantee (BIG), according to SDH proponents, would theoretically reach the entire food insecure population at once (Tarasuk, 2017). In an encouraging development for HFI reduction, a basic income approach is currently being studied by the BC and Prince Edward Island governments (Government of British Columbia, 2019; Yarr, 2020).

Quebec has also expressed plans to implement a basic income in its Government Action Plan to Foster Economic Inclusion and Social Participation (Government of Quebec, 2017), but it is still restricted to people with limited capacity for employment, in other words members of the "deserving poor." This document builds upon two previous poverty reduction strategies which introduced public investments worth $4.4 billion from 2004–2010 and $7.1 billion from 2010–2015. These measures, which include universal child assistance, an annual review of the minimum wage, the construction of affordable housing, as well as the indexation and supplementation of social assistance benefits, have contributed to the province's second-lowest rate of poverty (7.9%) (Statistics Canada, 2020b) and lowest rate of food insecurity (11.1%) (Tarasuk & Mitchell, 2020) in Canada. Notably, all three documents signal the province's overt recognition for human rights, poverty being in tacit violation of social and economic rights (Government of Quebec, 2004; 2010).

From Policy to Politics

From a political economy perspective, a BIG might still fail to account for broader structures of power within which it would be embedded (Raphael et al., 2018). While a Basic Income Guarantee would certainly reduce poverty and its attendant social symptoms such as HFI, this effect can only go as far as Canada's deficient welfare state allows. In this policy environment, a BIG would be unlikely to elevate low-income people to comfortable levels above the poverty line – especially in the absence of additional social supports such as subsidized housing, prescription drugs, employment training, and national childcare (Raphael et al., 2018). While progressive proponents of a BIG typically advocate for a concurrent expansion of social supports such as housing and childcare, neoliberal policymakers have also co-opted the BIG approach as a strategy for dismantling and privatizing social programs to be traded in an inequitable market economy (Young, 2009). Given that food is primarily a market commodity in Canada (outside of Indigenous and Northern communities), we consider both fundamentally adequate incomes and necessary social supports to be public entitlements. Targeted social programs are particularly important for people who are often excluded from the labour market (e.g. women). Policy interventions must also be integrated, multi-pronged, and intersectional in order to redress multiple systems of oppression (e.g. patriarchy, racism, colonialism) within which social institutions have been embedded.

The risk of rollbacks to these social supports, potentially justified by a neoliberal rollout of a BIG, is particularly high in "liberal" welfare states which promote the prioritization of market rather than state solutions to welfare problems (Myles, 1998). Compared with other OECD nations, liberal welfare states including Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, UK, and the USA contain greater income inequality, higher poverty rates, and diminished social supports because business interests increasingly take precedence over the basic needs and rights of citizens (Raphael et al., 2018). It's no coincidence that these countries comprise Riches' (2018) core group of "food bank nations" which have expanded to encompass high- and middle-income countries across the globe. The retrenchment and appropriation of welfare regimes worldwide, as evidenced by the spread of institutionalized food banks, is a direct consequence of neoliberalism.

Under neoliberalism, Canadian governmental responses to HFI have primarily consisted of inaction and indifference, if not outright denial. In 2012, the former Immigration Minister of the Conservative government, Jason Kenney, famously denounced concerns raised by De Schutter's UN hunger envoy as "completely ridiculous" and a "waste of resources to come to Canada to give political lectures" (Canadian Press, 2012). For all his willful ignorance, Kenney's response ironically illuminated the politics of HFI. More recently, the Ontario Progressive Conservative government's abrupt termination of a basic income pilot research program launched under the former Liberal government is another example of political influence and shortsightedness in HFI reduction policies (Rushowy, 2018). Since basic income experiments are likely to outlast the political regimes that undertake them, Mendelson (2019) recommends the appointment of external agencies, with the endowment of adequate funds upfront, to run future studies to completion. Decades ago, a similar Canadian minimum income experiment (Minicome) involving 1,300 households and a rigorous research component from 1975–1979 ended before producing a final report (Hum & Simpson, 1993). Although some of the original data was lost, participants later reported measurable improvements in the community's health as a result of its poorest members receiving a guaranteed cash supplement (Forget, 2011). Archival qualitative accounts also suggest that the experiment provided income benefits without stigma and helped to break down the distinction between the "deserving" and "undeserving" poor (Calnitsky, 2016). In all likelihood, these basic income studies were cancelled not in spite of their preliminary success, but because of it.

In theory, at least in income-based frameworks, BIG appears to be the most logical policy response to HFI. In practice, policy decisions are at least as ideological as they are logical. Despite the growing body of literature critiquing the policy environment surrounding HFI (Tarasuk, 2017; Emery et al., 2013b; Dachner & Tarasuk, 2018), governments have paid little heed to recurring recommendations for strengthening social supports with some recent exceptions. Mendly-Zambo and Raphael (2019) argue that policy analysis has hitherto been ineffective due to its failure to reckon with political motivations for governmental indifference. In the following section, we invoke the 'right to food' in order to build political momentum for HFI reduction policies.

The Right to Food

To safeguard access to food in the age of neoliberalism, and hopefully thereafter, we echo Riches and Tarasuk's (2014) call for a change of public perspective: from food as a need to be voluntarily met by charity systems, to food as a right to be secured through social policy action. The right to food, defined 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" (ICESR, 1999), implies the redistribution of wealth, rather than food, within high-income countries. In popular discourse, it is commonly misconstrued as the right to be fed, which is something that food charity can accomplish to a limited extent. Rather, the right to food describes state obligations to allow people to *feed themselves* with dignity, something that a food bank cannot provide.

Although the principle of autonomy underlies our argument against charity, we acknowledge that this conceptualization tends to overlook the caregiving role of women, especially in the domestic sphere. Those who are unable to feed themselves, such as children, often rely on women for food, breastfeeding, and meal preparation. Since this work operates in relational networks that exist outside of the market economy, it can be a source of fulfillment on one hand, and vulnerability on the other, for care providers and recipients alike (van Esterik, 1999; Frank, 2015). Hence the need for a more intersectional interpretation of the right to food that includes the "right to feed," which would enshrine as entitlements the resources necessary for predominantly female caregiving work that has been vastly undervalued (van Esterik, 1999). Such recognition may not only support female providers of care, but also encourage men to assume a higher proportion of these domestic duties. Considering the traditionally inequitable division of domestic labour, the "right to feed" should also promote female participation in the labour force for those who derive empowerment from employment. Ultimately, this is a matter of choice – a central tenet to the right to food and a recurring theme in this article. Whether through employment or caregiving, the right to food, and to feed, commands labour and welfare supports (e.g. increased income, parental leave, childcare) that once again highlight the imperative for social policy interventions as opposed to charitable approaches.

Another misconception about the right to food is that the general population should feed itself by growing its own food. Among the two modes of food procurement recommended by the UN, it is much more feasible for wealthy nations to provide its citizens with "money and access to the market," which represent the main mode of food acquisition in these countries, than it is for them to provide "land, seeds, water, and other resources," especially in urban environments (United Nations, 2010, p. 3). Furthermore, if individual agency is an organizing principle in the right to food, there is scarce agency in the inability to buy food on one's own terms, even with the ability to produce or prepare one's own food. From an income-based perspective, this is the local food movement's main theoretical fallacy. To illustrate, research from PROOF indicates that HFI is associated not with neighbourhood food environments in cities (Kirkpatrick & Tarasuk, 2010), gardening activities (Huisken et al., 2016), nor food skills (Huisken et al., 2016), which represent cornerstones of local food initiatives, but primarily with inadequate income (Tarasuk, 2017), an issue not fully addressed by these programs. Although the local food movement supports the livelihoods of food producers, it tends to ignore those of the general population, the majority of whom do not work in the agrarian sector in industrialized countries.

Within the local food movement, the frameworks of community food security and food sovereignty are commonly framed as critical antitheses to charitable initiatives – a claim that we support with respect to the food system but question within the context of social policy. Both frameworks seek to return means of food production and distribution to the local scale in order to promote sustainable and ethical food systems, albeit with subtle differences. Community food security tends to emphasize community development objectives such as social connectivity and education, which are often connected to charitable food initiatives, while food sovereignty is more politically radical in challenging the commodification of food, exploitative supply chains, as well as social inequalities produced by urban planning and the inequitable distribution of wealth. Although the last topic represents the focus of this paper, which is certainly aligned with food sovereignty in this sense, income is often insufficiently prioritized relative to the other factors.

The centrality of market-based access to food also calls into question the dichotomization of rights and commodities. When food production represents a source of livelihoods rather than subsistence, as is promoted within the food sovereignty framework, it typically (but not necessarily) depends on the commodification of food to generate income for producers. In the Global North, the violation of the right to food arguably involves a different system of commodification: that of welfare entitlements, which have become entirely conditional on the ability to participate in a labour market that lacks adequate jobs and incomes (Riches, 1997).

In spite of these contradictions, food system and income-based concerns can still be complementary – and should be – if we are to truly realize the right to sustainable, adequate, and accessible food. Increased incomes would likely strengthen supply chains by enabling consumers to purchase more foods from local producers. In this sense, the local food movement's rhetoric of empowerment can be actualized through purchasing power, arguably to a much larger extent than through distributing food. Joining income advocacy with existing local food initiatives would also consolidate power among civil society for mobilizing upon the right to food, but without allowing governments to evade their obligations to this right, as we will discuss later in this article.

Accountability

As the "primary duty bearer" of rights, the state is responsible for guaranteeing both market and non-market income at levels that are sufficient for procuring food. In "food bank nations" such as Canada, this federal responsibility has been unfairly downloaded onto provincial governments, municipalities, communities, and individuals who are struggling to bear this burden. Moreover, it has been offloaded to the corporate sector which stands to profit from the perpetuation of charity-based band-aid responses to hunger. These neoliberal processes have eroded welfare entitlements, along with the recognition of these as inalienable rights, to the extent that food insecurity is now persistent and widespread (Riches, 2018; Riches & Tarasuk, 2014). Evidently, neoliberal regimes cannot be trusted to uphold their obligations to citizens independently. While rights are to be primarily borne by the state, their enforcement requires political pressure from above (international bodies) and, more importantly, from below (civil society).

International Law

Canada has ratified several international agreements enshrining the right to food, first established in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, then reinforced at the 1996 World Food Summit, and further developed in the 1999 International Covenant of Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESR) (Riches 2018). As a treaty that is technically legally binding, the ICESR (1999) – if enforced – can potentially move Canadian social policy towards compliance with international law, particularly in terms of "respect[ing], protect[ing], and fulfill[ing]" the right to food (Riches et al., 2004; Ziegler et al., 2011).

"Respect" runs contrary to policies that deny access to food for vulnerable populations, essentially leaving them to the indignity of "institutionalized begging" (Riches et al., 2004; Riches, 2020, slide 15). These hostile policies include punitive welfare reforms that discriminate against the "undeserving poor" (Riches, 2018); wages, benefits, and income assistance rates that have failed to keep up with costs of living (Dachner & Tarasuk, 2018); as well as rollbacks to tax and labour regulations in the corporate sector (Procyk, 2014). The "protection" of rights, then, requires the regulation of actors that would otherwise violate the rights of others (Ziegler et al., 2011). Rights violations, particularly in an exploitative labour market, may be prevented by increases to the minimum wage, corporate taxation, inclusive hiring requirements, employer contributions to the Canada Pension Plan (CPP), Employment Insurance (EI), and worker's compensation, as well as strengthened maternity and parental leave wage replacements.

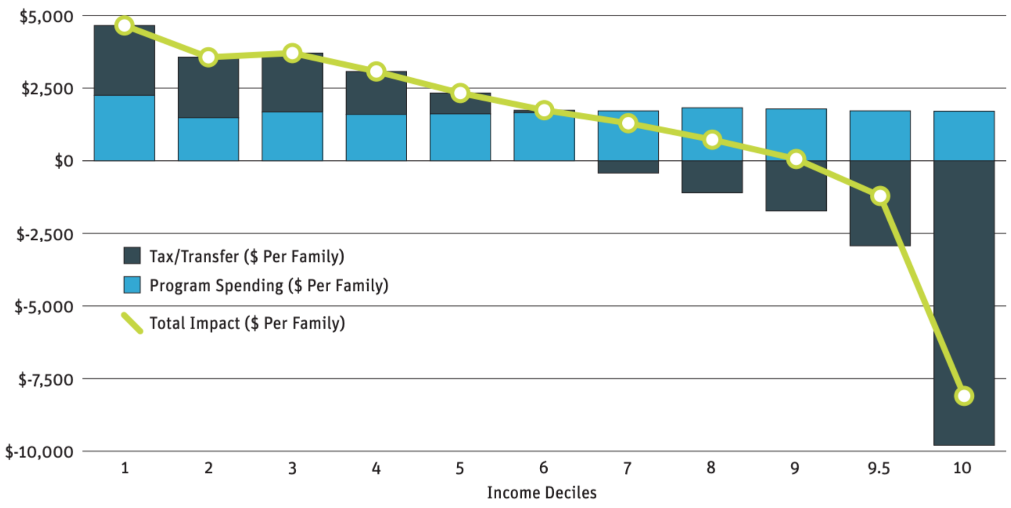
Following the removal of barriers to rights, the most important intervention is to pro-actively "fulfill" access to rights, particularly for vulnerable populations (Ziegler et al., 2011). The right to food, by way of poverty reduction, dictates the provision of adequate income supports (social assistance, disability payments, EI) and social services (affordable housing, child care, prescription medication) to *all* who require them (Riches et al., 2004). This may involve not only restoring and reinforcing but also re-configuring Canada's welfare system.

Universal Rights, Redistributive Justice

For their part, fragmented, uncoordinated, and inadequately funded welfare programs are not designed to maximize access to rights, much less justice. The majority of income assistance programs (social assistance, disability, EI) are predicated on need, which is often attached to stigma, political resistance, and restrictions, such as means testing. By contrast, universal benefits, such as Medicare, are understood to be rights and tend to be more socially acceptable, politically normalized, inclusive, efficient, and adequate (Lightman & Lightman, 2017). We recommend that this model extend to full support or subsidies for various other rights including universal pharmacare, post-secondary education, childcare, and housing, all of which reinforce the right to food.

However, "one-size-fits-all" solutions that homogenize social groups, such as universal social programs, still fail to address the specific needs of diverse populations and the inequitable socio-economic outcomes they experience, and require multi-dimensional, targeted measures to rectify. The full realization of social and economic rights, then, will likely require a combination of uniform, *and* redistributive policy measures. To illustrate this point, the Canadian Centre of Policy Alternatives (CCPA) proposed an Alternative Federal Budget characterized by roughly equal program spending and negatively proportional cash transfers across income brackets (Figure 1) (Canadian Centre of Policy Alternatives, 2016). This would ensure not only that social benefits are spread across the board, but, more importantly, that low-income households stand to benefit the most.

Figure 1



Note. Distribution of financial impacts across income deciles in the *2016 Alternative Federal Budget.* From CCPA (2016).

As a resource that underpins myriad rights, an adequate income ought to be a universal entitlement delivered to those who lack one. Similar to CCPA's (2016) model, this may assume the form of a BIG administered through a progressive tax and transfer system into which currently disparate programs can be folded (Lightman & Lightman, 2017). Compared with flat-rate welfare programs based on restrictive eligibility criteria, a BIG is administered more broadly, efficiently, and flexibly, with less stigma,. Nevertheless, social programs must not be integrated at the expense of policies that specifically respond to vulnerable populations and should not be designated based on whether they "deserve" assistance. The right to food is universal and inalienable: everyone deserves to feed themselves and to feed those who rely upon them.

Legal or Social Justice?

Although a number of international bodies (the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights; the Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights ; the FAO Right to Food Team, the UN Human Rights Council, and the UN Special Rapporteur to the Right to Food) technically govern the right to food, their legal response to violations has been non-existent thus far (Riches, 2018). This is likely due to geopolitics: international coalitions, even those functioning to uphold human rights, contain neoliberal trade networks (e.g. OECD countries) that have produced inequality both between and within member nations. Insofar as the right to food threatens the global “race to the bottom” in labour regulations, we suspect that the overriding political incentive would be to uphold, rather than challenge, the status quo.

We also question the utility of legal justice, which rarely works in favour of social justice; more often, it achieves the opposite. Canadian courts have consistently neglected social and economic rights in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, established at the advent of neoliberalism in 1982, and since reinterpreted from this ideological perspective. Accordingly, “positive rights” that require direct government spending and action, including rights to food, housing, and an adequate standard of living, have been politically unattractive to institutions devoted to deregulation and austerity (Track, 2015).

Consider the last significant poverty case considered by the Supreme Court of Canada in 2002, *Gosselin v Quebec*. The plaintiff challenged a devastating reduction in social assistance for Quebec residents under age 30 on the basis that it violated sections 7, the “right to life, liberty, and security,” and section 15, the “right to equality” (Riches et al., 2004; Track, 2015). According to Chief Justice Beverley McLachlin, these claims did not qualify as “special circumstance[s]” for positive obligation from the state (Track, 2015), as if income rates one-third of that necessary to cover food, clothing, and shelter were unexceptional. Such is the extent to which HFI has been normalized in “food bank nations.”

By contrast to positive obligations, Canadian authorities tend to privilege “negative rights,” traditionally conceived as civil and political rights, which command non-interference from the state or other parties. This preference belies the state’s neoliberal notion of market and individual freedom, to which redistributive economic policies are seen as disruptive (Track, 2015). And yet, there is no freedom in the inability to feed oneself, much less to participate in civil society, if basic needs are not met. The overlooked and undermined right to food is a precondition for the civil and political rights that the state purports to value.

Regardless of judicial outcomes, legal frameworks can nonetheless draw crucial public attention to injustice. In this sense, the right to food may be more effective as an educational and organizing tool (Fisher, 2017) than as a legal instrument. If the de-politicization of hunger is part of the problem, then the solution cannot rest solely upon institutions that maintain veneers of objectivity or mask neoliberalism. Instead, the bulk of political pressure likely lies in collective rather than legal action.

Civil Society

Under the right to food framework, the role of civil society is not necessarily to assume the state's responsibility for HFI reduction but to hold it accountable to that responsibility. The nonprofit sector currently represents the primary response to HFI, even though it is a serious public health concern requiring extensive public policy solutions that cannot be replaced with charity. It is important to note that leading up to the Great Depression, the Canadian welfare state originally grew to fill widespread deficiencies in social supports, which were the traditional domain of families and communities (Lightman & Lightman, 2017). Today we risk a return to the very conditions that made the welfare state necessary.

Although communities should continue to produce or provide food for those in need, they must also leverage their position to condemn, rather than to inadvertently conceal, the perpetuation of this need by neoliberal authorities. Food insecure people and their allies represent a potentially sizeable source of political pressure that has been defused by "uncritical solidarity" in the nonprofit sector (Riches, 2018), disempowered by a lack of representation in discourse, and dismissed by the world at large. While some community initiatives have been exemplars in drawing attention to the unacceptable political conditions behind the needs of their clientele, these programs are the exception. One such model can be found in an Ontario "union" of church food pantry volunteers entitled "Freedom 90," a name that captures the desire of members to "retire" from volunteering by 90 (Fisher, 2017). They have pragmatically confronted the paradox of food charity by providing charitable food assistance while at the same time advocating for poverty reduction policies that would eliminate the need for their services. By contrast to typical charitable initiatives, which have become entrenched in society, Freedom 90's ultimate goal is to make the very sector in which it operates – food banks – obsolete. If obsolescence is the objective, it makes sense that such political action would occur in spheres that are farther removed from corporate control, namely community-based food programs as opposed to centralized food bank networks that operate under heavy corporate influence.

To mobilize effectively for social action, communities will need to evolve from simply putting food on the table to inviting missing voices to the table regarding HFI 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). Once again, we find that the right to food is inseparable from civil and political liberties. Following the list of recommendations for civil society (Table 1) and policymakers (Table 2) below (in no particular order), we conclude this article by reiterating the centrality of personal agency in realizing the right to food.

Table 1

Recommendations for civil society

Objective	Action
Discursive clarity	• Commit to a definition of food insecurity that emphasizes the underlying issue of inadequate income. More intuitive terms include "food poverty" and "domestic hunger in the rich world" • Distinguish food insecurity from food security and its attendant responses such as charity, local food production and food literacy education
Narrative change	• Change the narrative surrounding the redistribution of surplus food: instead of a "win-win" solution for environment and society, it is a by-product of both a wasteful food system and an inadequate social safety net • Establish a long-term goal of ending, not perpetuating or ameliorating, demand for food charity • Incorporate the Right to Food into community food program principles and practices, holding the state accountable to unfulfilled social entitlements that communities are now trying and failing to meet
Empowerment	• Provide mutual aid to food insecure people while drawing attention to the political economic conditions that make this aid necessary • Empower participants to express their rights to food, housing, and other basic necessities, as well as advocate for the social policies required to fulfill them • Join poverty activism with local food movement and decentralized charitable initiatives and discourses, establishing new partnerships in the voluntary sector

Table 2

Policy recommendations

Strengthening social services	• Develop robust income policies that are indexed to the cost of living, including increases to social programs (e.g., Employment Insurance, disability assistance, income assistance) and labour entitlements (e.g., the minimum wage) • Strengthen programs that reduce costs of living and promote social inclusion (e.g., subsidized housing, extended prescription coverage, employment training, and national childcare) • Consider implementing a Basic Income Guarantee, administered through progressive taxes and transfers, without eroding existing social supports • Develop policies that support care work and the right to feed (e.g., extended parental leaves and increased wage replacements)
Accountability	• Establish and monitor food insecurity reduction targets in provincial and national poverty reduction strategies

Beggars or Choosers: Arriving at the Right to Food

One could say that something is rotten in the state of Canada. The decay goes much deeper than spoiled food, right down to the "unholy alliance" between anti-hunger groups, corporations, and governments (Fisher, 2017). We have only grown accustomed to the stench, often disguised beneath the aroma of "sweet charity," a neologism Poppendieck (1999) uses to question the expanding support for charitable food initiatives that have replaced government welfare programs. Amid mass publicity for food production and provisioning initiatives, it is deeply concerning that we have left behind the casualties of "roll-back" neoliberalism and forgotten about the systems that used to support them. In lieu of a functional social safety net, wealthy countries have merely been redistributing "leftover food" to "left-behind people" through the charitable sector (Riches, 2018), which is buttressed by vested corporate and governmental interests that have co-opted communities into their service. This arrangement characterizes not only food banks, but also community meals, kitchens, and gardens that similarly obscure poverty. Community food programs may provide food with more nutrition and dignity than do food banks, but their recipients ultimately remain unable to feed and advocate for themselves. These initiatives respond to needs rather than to rights, the crucial difference being notions of empowerment, control, and choice.

Rights holders should be free to choose what to eat, whom to support politically, which policies to lobby for, and how to participate in civil society. For many individuals, these choices have been severely constrained by a lack of socio-economic resources that were formerly guaranteed by senior levels of government. The irony here is that neoliberal rollbacks to the welfare state, made in ideological service to individual freedom, have actually impeded autonomy for a large sector of the population. From this perspective, the regulation and redistribution of capital arguably liberates more than it limits.

As an alternative to neoliberalism, the present analysis follows Lightman and Lightman's (2017) institutional model of social policy in which markets are unable to meet welfare needs yet remain relevant in society. It is important to acknowledge that even with a robust welfare state, this approach leaves exploitative trade and power relations intact. Hence the imperative for civil society to apply political pressure, and even create alternative economies that resist dominant market rationalities. Within overarching and heavily entrenched systems of capitalism, however, we must still ensure that resources are fairly distributed in society, particularly to its most vulnerable members.

In considering the rise and decline of the welfare state, we may find not only tragedy but potential redemption. History offers an important reminder that public policy can prioritize social well-being and that we can have societies without food banks – as unfathomable as that may seem today. "Tried and true" policy solutions to reduce or eliminate poverty and HFI already exist, and have existed for the greater part of the 20th century, at least until they were superseded by neoliberalism. Their trajectory suggests that there is nothing immutable about prevailing political regimes, though rights should be rendered non-negotiable if they are to withstand shifting ideologies.

Safeguarding the right to food, then, will require more than a return to Keynesian economics, which originally fell out of favour due to the end of the consensus between labour and capital. Historically, labour received a slice of the economic pie as long as the pie kept expanding. When the pie contracts, as it did during the oil crisis of 1973, the corporate sector tends to engulf the public's share (Lightman & Lightman, 2017). But, no matter how you slice it, whether the pie grows or shrinks, the right to food should be unequivocal. Until this is realized, Canada's economic and social rights record warrants a proverbial serving of humble pie.

Just as money buys food choice, "policy implies [political] choice" (Lightman & Lightman 2017, p. 324). Neoliberalism is not a given, but a policymaking decision, as is the case with human rights. As a self-appointed "champion" of rights, the Canadian government ought to put its money where the mouths of its citizens are. And if civil society were to politicize rather than pacify these voices, their choice would be loud and clear. In this sense, rights engender not only state obligations, but an ongoing negotiation for inclusion within political communities that realize everyone's right to a dignified life. Collectively, we can make the right (to food) choice.

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