Combining Social Justice and Sustainability for Food Security

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Introduction

In Canada, two broad approaches are taken to promoting domestic food security: one of these seeks to establish a sustainable food system; and the other aims to eliminate poverty. These two approaches correspond to the two main dimensions of food security: the production and supply of an adequate quality and quantity of food; and the ability of individuals to reliably access food (Campbell et al. 1988; Beaudry 1991). Both of these dimensions of food security are threatened in Canada.

In this paper, I explore the roots of these two approaches to food security and the recent attempt to unite the issues of poverty and sustainability in a community-development approach to food security. I am concerned that the impact of the current community-development approach may contribute to "victim blaming" and in the longer term may not benefit either the antipoverty or the sustainability movement. This short overview contains many simplifications and generalizations, which I hope will not detract from the purpose of the paper, which is to promote discussion of these important issues.

The antipoverty approach to food security

The antipoverty, or social-justice, approach to promoting food security starts from the premise that Canada has an adequate food supply and that food insecurity in this country results from people's lack of access to food. Because Canada is an industrialized country, with a market economy, where most citizens buy almost all their food, antipoverty activists assume that food insecurity results from poor people's lack of money to buy food. From this perspective, the opposite of food security is hunger, "the inability to obtain sufficient, nutritious, personally acceptable food through normal food channels or the uncertainty that one will be able to do so" (Davis and Tarasuk 1994, p. 51).

No evidence can be found of hunger on any large scale in Canada between the end of the Great Depression of the 1930s and the beginning of the 1980s (Davis and Tarasuk 1994). The Canadian social-security system grew out of the experiences of the Great Depression and a recognition that the structural forces responsible for poverty require macroeconomic state intervention. The social-security system was designed to give Canadians income security, thus alleviating poverty and hunger, and it reflected several commonly shared values: equity of income security, equality of access to

Canadian institutions, concern for the well-being of every individual, collective social

responsibility of all citizens, security in the face of economic uncertainty, social integration and cohesion, work as an integral part of a person's self, economic and social opportunity, self-sufficiency, and faith in democracy (CCSD 1993).

The first indication that the Canadian social safety net was failing, leaving people hungry, was in 1981, when the first food bank was established since the Great Depression (Riches 1986). Food banks became the predominant response to hunger throughout the 1980s and 1990s, spreading to communities all across the country (Davis and Tarasuk 1994). By November 1997, the number of communities with food banks had risen to 501, almost triple the number in 1989 (Canadian Association of Food Banks [CAFB], personal communication, Nov 1997[1]). In 1996, it is estimated that more than 3 million Canadians used food banks.

The antipoverty approach to food security is inseparable from macroeconomic and social-policy analysis, for example, high rates of unemployment, the polarization of the job market into "good" and "bad" jobs, minimum wages well below the poverty line, inadequate welfare benefits, high costs of housing, regressive taxation policies, off-loading of social programs to communities, and the unequal distribution of wealth (Laxer 1996; Riches 1997a, b). The welfare state of the past was not perfect: critics argue that it maintained inequality, institutionalized the feminization of poverty, created work disincentives, and failed to promote participation in society (CCSD 1993; Tarasuk and Davis 1996; MacGregor 1997; Torjman 1997a). But the antipoverty approach to food security rejects the destruction of the welfare state and the neoconservative values of individualism, competition, and inequality and proposes instead to restore values such as equality, fellowship, democracy, and humanitarianism to the foundation of social policy.

The antipoverty approach is concerned with income security, rather than food and food security per se. Community development within this approach focuses on raising awareness of poverty, advocacy with and for poor people, and community economic development. In the words of one antipoverty activist (Debbie Ellison, quoted in Hobbs et al. 1993),

> *We challenge people who aren't poor to listen to people who are poor . . . to join with us in rejecting American style social programs where food and housing are provided for the poor at the whim of the rich . . . to work with us to change our system to end poverty . . . to demand that our politicians work for a just society, where people are more equal and where the poor don't have to depend on leftovers from the rich to subsist.*

The sustainable-food-systems approach to food security

The sustainable-food-systems approach to food security has roots both in the political-economy critique of the contemporary food system and in the environmental movement. The political-economic critique of the food system analyzes the dramatic

changes in the food system over the past 60 years, including the following (Goodman and Redclift 1991; Winson 1993):

- The marginalization of small-scale primary producers and processors;

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[1] CAFB, personal communication, November 1997.

- Loss of rural ways of life;
- Horizontal and vertical integration, consolidation, and monopolization in the food industry and agriculture;
- Manipulation of food and its packaging to increase profit; and
- Alienation of food consumers from food producers and from the food that they eat, including "de-skilling," or the loss of people's abilities to grow and prepare food.

Thus, "food has changed from an integrated material and symbolic basis of life — breaking bread, in Western culture — into an array of edible products of complex, often global production chains" (Freidmann 1993, p. 216). As a result, "much of the work connected with food (like other work) has turned into 'jobs' " (Goodman and Redclift 1991, p. 5). These dramatic changes in the food system have been central "to the widening and deepening of capitalist relations within the world economy" (Freidmann 1982, p. 256). From this perspective, corporate control of the food system and the commodification of food are the predominant threats to food security.

Environmentalists have strengthened the food-system critique by showing that environmental degradation poses imminent threats to human living standards and well-being (Buttel 1993). According to the environmental perspective, the capitalistic food system completely disregards its environmental and human costs and is thus unsustainable. The advent of agricultural biotechnology has raised a host of new concerns for critics of the capitalistic food system, such as corporate control over patents for genetic material, new ways of exploiting indigenous people's knowledge, new environmental fears, and new food-safety issues. This analysis provides further evidence of the bankruptcy of the capitalistic food system.

Until recently, the sustainable-food-systems approach to food security has focused on the production side of the food system and has called for sustainable agricultural production. Some scholars have recognized the limitations of this approach and recommended a food-system approach that encompasses food production, distribution, preparation, preservation, consumption, recycling and disposal of waste, and support systems. As Dahlberg (1993) noted, sustainable agriculture can only be successful to the extent that other parts of the food system and the rest of society also become more sustainable. The food-systems approach is appealing because it addresses domestic hunger and is meaningful to a wider audience, including urban dwellers of all classes.

Clancy (1993) and Allen and Sachs (1993) are among those who, in their explications of sustainable food systems, have expressed the need for social justice for the poor (as well as for those marginalized in the agricultural system) and, in Allen's words, the

need to reaffirm that "the goal of agriculture is first and ultimately sustaining human life" (Allen 1993, p. 1). Clancy (1994) outlined a number of reasons for people concerned about sustainable agriculture to take an interest in social justice; for example, both agriculture unsustainability and poverty are based in the larger, capitalistic economic system; food is a basic human right; the poor represent a huge new domestic market for farmers; and the interests of small farmers and the urban poor have a "common ideological situation as occupants of marginal positions in the highly capitalized food system" (Clancy 1994, p. 82).

The sustainable-food-systems approach has been applied to food projects for the poor in both Canada and the United States (TFPC 1994; Fisher and Gottlieb 1995; Torjman 1997b). Such projects are of two major types: first, the creation of alternative food-distribution and marketing projects, such as farmers' markets and community-supported agriculture; and, second, "self-provisioning" activities, including people's growing, preserving, and preparing their own food, often in collaboration with others working in community gardens and kitchens. These ways of feeding the hungry are seen as affording the poor more dignity than does charitable food distribution. The self-provisioning activities promote self-reliance and skills development, and alternative distribution and marketing projects foster direct relationships between urban dwellers and farmers. Community-development food projects appeal to community workers because they produce tangible results — good wholesome food — for participants.

All of these types of project emphasize making the food system local and fostering the development of community. As Morris (1996, p. 438) put it, "small is the scale of efficient, dynamic, democratic, and environmentally benign societies." In Canada, the sustainable-food-systems approach is often labeled "community development." In the United States, it is called "community food security." This approach is compatible with communitarianism, as described by Frazer and Lacey (1993, pp. 1–2):

> *the thesis that the community, rather than the individual, the state, the nation, or any other system is and should be at the centre of our analysis and our value system. . . . Communitarians can be understood to be conducting a straightforward prescriptive argument: human life will go better if communitarian, collective, and public values guide and construct our lives.*

Frazer and Lacey noted that the appeal of communitarian ideas is rooted in widespread alienation, our ideals of community — solidarity, reciprocity, love, and support — and contemporary fear that society as we know it is disintegrating. Frazer and Lacey (1993, p. 136) believe that "the fear of the loss of community, and with it identity, lies deep in some cultural vein." Participation in sustainable-food-systems programs is especially appealing because it offers people an opportunity to identify with a defined community, an opportunity to connect with nature, and "the liberating potential of the escape from capitalist relations of production, the release from the

alienation of work, and the individualistic search for creative alternatives" (Gerry and Connolly, cited in Redclift and Mingione 1985, p. 4).

Appraising contemporary Canadian food projects

Community-development food projects for the poor are often only one piece of a larger agenda for addressing social and economic inequities (TFPC 1994; OPHAFSWG 1995), but the food projects are currently receiving the most attention as alternatives to food banks and their indignities. Community-development food projects have been isolated from larger agendas of structural change. The rhetoric of "community" has played a large role in the agendas of neoconservative governments, which have combined the ideologies of deregulation and downsizing of government with appeals to the value of communities taking responsibility for many of the functions of the welfare state. Neo-conservative governments "evoke a [romanticized] past era in which stable, integrative, identity-generating communities were a dominant feature of social organization"

(Frazer and Lacey 1993, p. 136). Such communities no longer exist for the majority of the poor, who live in urban centres. But even if they did, the rhetoric ignores the oppressiveness of communities for those who "don't belong," for whatever reason. The rhetoric of community also fails to address issues of power — who gets to join, to speak, to act, to be heard.

Off-loading the functions of the welfare state onto communities, whether through charitable food distribution or community-development food projects, strips away the relative anonymity and universality on which the Canadian welfare system used to be based. Food programs aimed at the poor tend to reinforce the individualistic ideology of neoconservative policies in that they suggest that the victim is to blame, rather than blaming socioeconomic policies that leave the poor without resources. Jolly (1997) described "the corporatization of public policy and the privatization of poverty," in which urban agriculture becomes essential for the poor, but only as a "defensive option" in a two-tiered food system: a market-based system for those who can afford it; and a subsistence, self-sufficiency-based system for those who cannot.

The impact of food programs aimed at the poor is limited by other factors, most importantly by the sheer number of hungry Canadians, the amount of investment that is required to set up and maintain the programs, and the limited amounts of food they can provide. This is true of both charitable food distribution and community-development food projects. Although community-development strategies usually offer more dignity and provide better quality food than food banks, they present other problems. Self-provisioning activities and alternative distribution programs often exclude the most vulnerable because basic levels of resources, which provide stability and an ability to imagine the future (that is, hope), are usually prerequisites for participation.

Community-development food programs may place increased burdens on women, who

tend to be primarily responsible for the family's food. Mingione (1985) classified the activities of people to provide for themselves as "extraordinary work for self-consumption" in industrialized countries. He distinguishes these activities from "normal domestic work" and noted that the distinction between normal and extraordinary work for self-consumption changes with time, culture, and place. Self-provisioning activities add to the domestic work time and tend "to be distributed in a discriminative and inequitable manner" (Mingione 1985, p. 32). They also tend to have a low economic return, given the number of hours needed for production. Accordingly, self-provisioning activities tend to be most effective for those with large, multigenerational family structures, in which the household work is shared (Mingione 1985).

More generally, I am uncertain how well the sustainable-food-systems analysis considers class issues in trying to take account of the poor. The mainly privileged proponents of sustainability are most concerned about collective or public goods, such as food quality, health, and the environment (Buttel 1993). For poor people, the issue is more immediate and more personal — how to put food on the table for the next meal. As Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) pointed out, privileged activists and academics who struggle for an alternative, progressive vision of the future often feel marginalized and misunderstood in their own spheres, and they easily identify with those marginalized in other ways. However, the basis for their identification with the poor is limited. What is significant for middle-class activists may be of no consequence to poor people (and vice versa).

Most poor people — who are economically as well as politically marginalized — want to be full participants in society, including its consumerism. Steedman

(1986, p. 8) explained that for some, poverty promotes an incalculable longing for the things denied, "a subterranean culture of longing for that which one can never have." The symbol of success for a food cooperative I visited, which was run by poor people, was its bank of freezers filled with convenience food, such as individually wrapped chicken *cordon bleu*. People in the dominant middle and upper classes set the standards for what is desirable in our society. For now, these are not the standards promoted through the sustainable-food-systems approach. To promote sustainability — and to promote social justice — we will have to change the dominant culture. We will have to create a society with the preeminent values of respecting the planet and meeting the basic needs of all people, including those in future generations.

Conclusions

Food solutions will not solve the problem of poverty. Without social justice for the poor in the larger society (that is, a guarantee of an adequate and dignified level of material resources to allow every citizen the stability and security to participate fully in society), programs aimed at improving the food problems of the poor will only reinforce individualistic solutions to structural problems, no matter what the intentions

of the programers.

In this brief overview, I have tried to show that food security encompasses a diversity of approaches to a variety of problems. The all-inclusiveness of the term *food security* can obscure the nature of the problem. This is important to understand, because the way we frame a problem determines the ways we try to solve it (Tesh 1988). I have also called for reflexivity on the part of academics and activists, because our positions in society affect the ways we understand and frame problems.

The task of bringing together the antipoverty and sustainable-food-systems approaches is neither simple nor self-evident. It involves multiple contradictions and conflicting interests that will remain unresolved unless we acknowledge and elucidate them and then think clearly and carefully about how to overcome them. Democracy cannot thrive without social justice. The planet cannot thrive without sustainability. The future looks bleak unless we find ways to achieve both.

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