

It's time to close Canada's food banks

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Food banks have become a serious obstacle in the fight against poverty. By promising to “end hunger” by feeding hungry Canadians, they provide a comforting illusion that no one is hungry – or if they are, it’s their own fault. They shelter us from the harsh reality that millions lack the basic necessities of life.

It’s time to close our food banks. I’ve reached this conclusion after 18 years of researching food, hunger and poverty; volunteering at food banks; serving on a food bank board; and recently taking part in a challenge where I ate from a typical food bank hamper for three days.

The first problem is that food banks can never end hunger.

Most people who could officially be classified as “hungry” simply don’t use them. In the only national survey that bothered to ask (conducted by Human Resources Development Canada), one in four hungry Canadians used food banks. Many would rather go hungry than accept charity. Or they choose to leave the food for those who, they tell themselves, “really” need it.

Research shows that even those who use food banks go hungry. That’s because food banks can only supply what is donated. Given the overwhelming demand for their services and their limited supply, food banks must ration how much they provide to clients. Most restrict households to a once-a-month hamper.

No one wants to see Canadians go hungry. This reaction led to the creation of food banks in the first place. That was in the early 1980s, when a deep recession pushed up unemployment. The good-hearted people who started them thought food banks would be a short-term response. Now they’re a normal feature of our landscape.

I’m not trying to blame food banks. The staff and volunteers who fed almost 900,000 Canadians last year are caring and dedicated, and they work hard to reduce the indignities of charity for those who receive it. But food banks are unable to do what they promise. They allow some people to experience less hunger. The problem, however, is too big for community-based charities to solve. Food banks have had 25 years to “end hunger.” Instead, demand continues to grow. It is time to stop applying a “solution” that isn’t working.

Food banks also serve many unintended functions. To start, those of us who donate, volunteer or participate in food drives “feel good” about making a difference in the lives of others. But we need to look beyond this aspect of our volunteer experiences.

Food banks also let governments off the hook from their obligation to ensure income security for all Canadians. They undermine social solidarity and social cohesion by dividing us into “us” (those who give) and “them” (those who receive).

Food banks are good for corporations, especially food corporations. They can use food banks to offload edible food they can’t sell, then advertise themselves as caring businesses. And holding corporate-wide

food drives builds company morale. None of these corporate benefits are problematic in themselves, but they mean that corporations have a vested interest in the status quo.

Food banks can never solve the problem of poverty. It's time to hold our governments accountable to their obligation to ensure that all Canadians have a standard of living adequate for health and well-being.

Giving food to those who are hungry is a simple response that everyone supports. Tackling poverty means wrestling with diverse ideas about causes and solutions. It's time to begin that political conversation. But first we have to remove the obstacle that food banks have become.

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