
**School of Social and Political Sciences**

# Right to Food in Rural Appalachia:
# Hunger in the 'Hidden America'

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# Abstract

This dissertation consults with a select sampling of primary participants of the United States food aid system regarding their perceptions of the universal concept of 'right to food' and its possible implications on the practice of seeking and distributing food aid. This thesis argues that food aid administrators may be aware of the concept of the right to food, but do not find it useful in the process of dispensing emergency aid. Correspondingly, food aid recipients may have no knowledge of the right to food, but will find the idea empowering as they consider their own food insecurity. In communicating with food bank clients and administrators, this project will look to assess whether a consciousness of 'right to food' exists among food aid participants, and if its existence affects participants' ability to access the right to food. The aims of this project will be to provide a focused understanding of: (1) the concept of right to food, (2) the motivations guiding the operation of food banks, and, in a greater sense, (3) the relationship between human rights as a concept and the real-world institutions currently addressing them. It will review literature on the subjects of food insecurity, food aid, and human rights in developed states. This dissertation will feature a case study of Second Harvest Food Bank of East Tennessee, but further how its employees and clients perceive the human right to food. In doing so, it will advance existing research by using qualitative methods to understand the current phenomena located at the intersection of hunger, aid, and the active assertion of a fundamental human right.

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# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

"Hunger is not an issue of charity. It is an issue of justice."

Jacques Diouf

The first time I ever ate out of a garbage can I was 25 years old. Granted, the food was in a sealed container, and was really only 'resting' on top of everything else. It was 2:00 AM and I was waiting, irritated, for a man from Arkansas, allegedly in the midst of dissolving an oil inheritance, to finish his peach tart.

I ate that leftover chicken in late July 2016, while I was biding my time until I could resume my postgraduate course after a year-long deferment. I got a job at an internationally-renowned luxury resort called Blackberry Farm, nestled between the hills at the base of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. At Blackberry I assumed, by all accounts, the classic posting of a servant. Each day, I transported elite clientele to dinner at Blackberry's premier restaurant, the Barn, in a sparkling new, Blackberry-owned Lexus vehicle, and waited in a nook behind the hostess podium for them to finish eating. Last year, one *New York Times* reporter cited the Barn as leader of the American South's "culinary renaissance." He observed Blackberry as a "place where the powerful could lose themselves on a rope swing and where rich Manhattanites could put on hiking boots and wander down to the trout stream" (Severson 2016).

Every patron of Blackberry Farm has eaten at the Barn: Robert Downey Jr. and his wife, Pharrell Williams, Liam Neeson, Kelly Clarkson, some ambassadors, a host of state government officials, a Saudi prince, brackets of professional athletes, a handful of seats in the current Trump administration, and Bill and Melinda Gates. Before check-in, I retrieved said and other guests from the local airport, a task which involved picking through the small town of Maryville, Tennessee, past crumbling houses, derelict community action agencies, thrift stores, pawn shops, and Blount Memorial Hospital. More often than not, I would hear one of the guests behind me whisper and chuckle quietly as we slid past Maryville's residents, particularly this one old man who sells Confederate flag memorabilia at his handmade stand in an abandoned, weed-eaten parking lot.

It was only a few weeks later, after I accepted a position at Second Harvest Food Bank of East Tennessee, also in Maryville, that I ever sought introspection concerning those drives, and the stalwart partition between what I would hear and what I could wilfully ignore. Ironically, the people outside the car windows, whom I would see but not see, became the food insecure clients receiving emergency assistance from my new employer. Over time, I noted the discrepancies between the circles I worked to serve. I left a profession where I skipped and scrambled after individuals with the means to champion food charity to serve the aid-seeking masses hidden in plain sight.

In a time of domestic political turmoil, international conflict, and rapid globalization, human rights are perhaps more conceptually and logistically accessible than ever before. Simultaneously, the social construction of first world hunger as a cause for charity has focused a spotlight on domestic hunger and its increasing prevalence. Currently, American food banks provide aid to more people per year than government food assistance services, yet the quantity of food insecure American citizens continues to grow. Though food banks provide temporary relief to those in poverty, they may only offer basic subsistence from day-to-day, not a route out of poverty. Therefore, they cannot be used as a substitute for real measures to address underlying poverty and inequality, and the food insecurity they generate (Riches & Silvasti 2014, 14).

Many factors currently invite a re-examination of food aid as the foremost solution to food poverty in upper income states. Deep cuts to social spending in many countries combined with continuing economic uncertainty have deteriorated the state of federal social provision reliance. In March 2017, President Donald Trump released his 53-page proposed budget plan that details extensive budget cuts to many government programs for the coming year. The plan is set to cut funding for the National Institutes of Health (which researches national hunger in a huge capacity) by $5.8 billion. It also proposed the elimination of the Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program and the Community Development Block Grant program, which combined provides approximately $3 billion for targeted projects related to community development, housing and homelessness programs, among others (Paletta & Mufson 2017). Each of these programs are connected by the fact that they overwhelmingly impact low-income Americans. The more capital that low-income individuals must allocate to filling the gaps

left by receding government services, the greater the likelihood of food insecurity and similar social ills worsening throughout the United States.

The right to food provides a unique opportunity to address social inequities faced by the disadvantaged in American society. If utilized, it could become a social movement dedicated to building the voices and political power of these populations. Further, it might create an arena in which we may examine the roles of the food retailing sector, food safety, and public health. This would create a framework that formalizes a relationship between consumers and producers, a "national food policy" (Fisher 2017, 37). Most promising is the right's insistence that actions be taken in order to strengthen people's access to and utilization of resources. Focus must be placed upon the most marginalized and vulnerable in society and in addressing systemic discrimination (Lambek 2015, 71). Demanding a rights-based approach to food insecurity would invite an examination of who is hungry, why they are hungry, and how, collectively, we may protect the dignity and wellbeing of all people. The right to food may be a defining tool in the process of eradicating food insecurity and hunger in the United States. What remains unclear is whether those actively involved in the administration and receipt of food aid are cognizant of its potential.

This dissertation explores the experiences of individuals confronting food insecurity in conjunction with right to food in asking: Is there a consciousness of the concept of the right to food among the food aid administrators and recipients that make up the private charitable food bank network in the United States? Further, it seeks understanding of the ways in which food aid administrators and clients perceive their role within the emergency food aid system. This thesis argues that food aid administrators may be aware of the concept of the right to food, but do not find it useful in the process of dispensing emergency aid. Correspondingly, food aid recipients may have no knowledge of the right to food, but will find the idea empowering as they consider their own food insecurity.

I address these questions and support my argument by conducting a case study of Second Harvest Food Bank of East Tennessee, an American food bank serving 168,000 Tennesseans each month across an 18-county service area. Because of its location and the size and diversity of the population it supports, this food bank serves as a principal

subject to examine this issue within the scope of this project. The structure of this dissertation is comprised of a review of relevant literature, the project's design and methods, including the researcher's position and ethical considerations, the researcher's findings in light of the research questions, and a discussion of their relevance among current debates regarding human rights and food insecurity.

# CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the concept of right to food, literature was reviewed with regard to the following subjects: the definition of the right to food, an overview of economic and social rights when confronting the concept of food insecurity, debates surrounding charitable food aid in the United States, and the definitions, classifications, and debates regarding human rights and their effectiveness in influencing policy.

At the World Social Forum in 2016, panellist Smita Narula asserted, "the right to food is the right of all people to be free from hunger and to have physical and economic access at all times to sufficient, nutritious, and culturally acceptable food" (Grunbaum 2016). "Contrary to popular perception, the right to food is not a right to a minimum number of calories, or simply the right to government entitlements," Narula added. "It is the right to a political and economic system, including a food system, wherein all people are empowered to provide for themselves in a dignified, healthy and sustainable way" (Grunbaum 2016). Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) declares that the right to adequate food is part of the right to a decent standard of living (Marchione & Messer 2010, 11). The right to food is also included in Article 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). The Special Rapporteur on the right to food in the Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights is an independent expert appointed by the Human Rights Council. This position officially defines the right to food as:

> The right to have regular, permanent and unrestricted access, either directly or by means of financial purchases, to quantitatively and qualitatively adequate and sufficient food corresponding the cultural traditions of the people to which the consumer belongs, and which ensure a physical and mental, individual and collective, fulfilling and dignified life free of fear (OHCHR 2017).

This definition is written in correspondence to the central elements of the right to food as defined by General Comment No. 12 (1999) of the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. The document further outlined what obligations States parties must fulfil to implement the right to adequate food at the national level,

including: (1) the obligation to *respect* existing access to adequate food; (2) the obligation to *protect* individuals form deprivation of, or access to, food by enterprises or other individuals; (3) the obligation to *fulfil* (facilitate) people's access to and utilization of resources and means to ensure their livelihood; and (4) the obligation to *fulfil* the right to food directly if an individual or group is unable, for reasons beyond their control, to have their rights realized (OHCHR 2017).

Jean Dréze and Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen contend that hunger is not simply a manifestation of an involuntary lack of food, but a result of "entitlement failure" (Chilton 2009). Therefore, individual access to adequate nutrition depends upon political and legal systems that allow for meeting basic needs. The US Department of Agriculture's definition of food security includes two domains: (1) ready availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods, and (2) an ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways (Chilton 2009). This definition implies a defined condition with no implicit governmental obligation. Therefore, there is no governmental obligation to uphold a state of being among individuals. Food insecurity can strike at multiple levels: individual, household, community, and nationwide. This insecurity is considered an outcome of social and economic processes that result in a lack of access to food, including a lack of adequate education and living wages, lack of access to healthcare and health information, and exposure to unsafe living conditions such as unsafe water, poor housing, and dangerous neighbourhood environments (Chilton 2009). Each of these is an indicator of poverty.

In a 2007 report on the right to food, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations argued that government officials are responsible for developing the capacity to fulfil their obligations and create policies that address individuals' specific needs (FAO 2007). As the right to food is comprehensively defined in the ICESCR, it is endorsed by the Committee of the International Committee on Economic Social and Cultural Rights, which oversees accountability for and utilization of the document. Several international summits dedicated to the right to food focused specifically on the implementation of this ICESCR. At the Rome Declaration on World Food Security in 1996, all countries except the United States and Australia agreed to adopt the notion that food is a basic human right and pledged to make efforts to cut world hunger in half by

2015 (Chilton 2009). Adopting the human rights framework for addressing food insecurity is accomplished via attention to several elements, including: (1) governmental accountability, (2) public participation, (3) an analytic framework that accounts for vulnerability and discrimination, and (4) stronger connections between policies and health outcomes (Chilton 2009).

The United State has established a notable record of formally protecting civil and political rights. The U.S. has ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Based on Race and Ethnicity. This said, the United States has not shown in the same gumption in promoting social, economic, and cultural rights, generally referred to as "basic rights." These rights include the right to a minimum standard of living, to health and well-being, to education, to housing, and to food as covered in the International Covenant of Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (Chilton 2009). The United States has signed this document, and thus agreed with its tenets. It has not ratified it, meaning that the United States government is unwilling to hold themselves legally accountable for implementation (Chilton 2009).

Normative principles dictate that the right to food must be applied without exclusion or compromise to countries and to groups and individuals. They also conceptualize food rights as inextricably tied to the rights of livelihood, health, and social security, to land, and especially to the right to participate in political decision that shape the formation and implementation of rights (Marchione & Messer 2010, 11). To address economic rights and devise legal instruments to enforce them is to recognize that market laws working in such a way that some social groups and peoples are deprived of basic necessities while others are accumulating surplus wealth (Spitz 1985, 306). Graham Riches and Tiina Silvasti argue that the right to food implies "a framework of national law which moves beyond policy guidelines to legislative action" (Fisher 2017, 34). The four obligations outlined in conjunction with the General Comment No.12 have inspired enough scepticism on the part of the United States that the likelihood of ratification seems less than slim. Rights-based approaches can be more difficult to adopt due to how subversive they may be to the dominant narratives they with which they must compete (Lambek 2015, 69). Utilizing the right to food in combating hunger in the United States

would mean introducing a counter-narrative and prioritizing social justice over corporate interests and profits with the food system (Grunbaum 2016).

The Constitution of the United States does not explicitly guarantee the right to adequate food. In the context of U.S. policy, the right to food is associated with food aid and programs that ostensibly 'fulfil' the right to food through direct assistance of the food insecure and malnourished, especially in emergencies (Marchione & Messer 2010, 11). Riches argues that the endurance of hunger in the U.S. is the product of an inherently unjust system. Certain attributes of current government services actively contribute to "failure" in this regard: weak systems of food and income distribution; under-funded social welfare; and a lack of affordable public housing that would alleviate dependency on charitable food bank handouts (Riches 2011, 770). The obligations outlined in General Comment No. 12 do not guarantee the right to be fed, only that each individual has the right to feed him or herself. Governments must only facilitate an adequate amount of food to those too 'vulnerable' to feed themselves. However, the existence of the charitable food banking network, which was designed to make up for the failure of policy, is conceptually contrastive to the right to food (Fisher 2017, 35). The right to food is the right to feed oneself in dignity. It is the right to have continuous access to the resources that will enable you to produce, earn or purchase enough food not only to prevent hunger, but also to ensure health and well-being. The right to food only rarely means that a person has the right to free handouts.

The duality of U.S. food support systems has spurred debate from politicians, anti-hunger activists, and scholars alike. "No one planned the emergency food network," Poppendieck explains, "no one even seems to have envisioned or hoped for its current extensive, well-capitalized state" (Poppendieck 1998, 111). Has food banking become part of the problem, rather than the solution? Further, "how effective and efficient is private philanthropy as an ameliorative response to hunger and the denial of food and nutrition as fundamental human rights?" (Riches 2011, 770). Many would argue that philanthropic food banking is a pragmatic endeavour that allows the public and corporate sectors to cohesively support their fellow community members. This idea has resulted in some social legitimacy, as there remains a perceived public confidence in private food banking's effectiveness and competences. However, Riches argues, such confidence may

not be warranted in addressing the problem from a human rights perspective (Riches 2011, 770). Too, confidence may even endanger the proliferation of pro-rights sentiment among those involved in the food aid system. The debate regarding right to food in the United States subsists in the negative space between the parameters of federal food aid and the limitations of charitable food aid.

Though the food charity network in the United States is one of the largest and most complex on earth, it has been inadequate in eliminating food insecurity. Janet Poppendieck provided one of the first, and perhaps most influential, glimpses into the United States food aid apparatus in her prolific book *Sweet Charity?* (1998). Much to the derision of more than one conservative book reviewer, she spends 318 pages faulting America's charitable food bank efforts for the increasingly grim state of food insecurity in the United States. She argues that the word "charity" may be used to identify the fault lines in a culture, meaning that states providing high equality comprehensive services would correspondingly need fewer charities to supplement those services. By solely defining the problem as 'hunger,' the emergency food system is directing attention away from the more fundamental problem of poverty and the persistence of inequality.

Graham Riches has also contributed much progressive study on the subject of right to food in developed states. In examining the interaction of hunger and human rights, he offers the following impression:

> …[I]t is only when we shift from talking about food security in blunt terms to talking about the right to food, in its many inter-connected dimensions, that we will be able to grasp the fact that pockets of hunger and undernutrition remain rife in the wealthiest countries in the world, and it is only then that we will grasp the reasons why (Riches & Silvasti 2014, 13).

Furthermore, he maintains that "the persistence, increase, and depth of hunger and household food insecurity in the world's rich societies seem rooted not so much in the failure of the food supply but in unacceptable levels of poverty and social inequality" (Riches 2011, 770). Ultimately, despite the compassion or moral imperative to feed hungry people, charitable food aid as an 'effective' response to hunger and poverty in developed states offers a host of disturbing ramifications (Riches & Silvasti 2014, 436). Today, it has deflected public discussion and media attention away from governmental

obligation and the right to food. “Hunger will not be solved by charity or by the commodification of land, but by ensuring rights, by ending social and economic injustice and by ensuring people’s agency over resources that are essential to their survival,” Narula contended. “I am talking about nothing less than shifting people’s consciousness” (Grunbaum 2016).

Access to food in developed states is not often regarded as a matter of governmental obligation. There remains an overarching public perception that charitable food banking is the most effective and efficient anti-hunger solution of last resort (Riches 2011, 770). Yigzaw maintains that the obligations to respect, to protect, and to fulfil include the obligations to facilitate and provide (Yigzaw 2014, 684). Rights are viewed as a difficult sell in the current political climate of the United States. Because the food banking network is dependent on monetary donations to continue operations, framing the right to food as an issue of justice may challenge public preconceptions of the extent to which United States government should be involved in food aid. For this reason, many anti-hunger groups have chosen to employ language surrounding the moral imperative of ending hunger, focusing on food as a human need rather than a human right (Fisher 2017, 36). This approach furthers food bank’s capacities when creating targeted programs, mobilizing communities, and appealing to the public for support.

When responding to the prevalence of hunger and the lack of directed efforts towards its eradication, using the right to food as a tool to ensure justice may be the best way to move forward. There seems a consensus among this study’s notable scholars that the right to food *must* be referred to as a legal right so as to ensure comprehensive measures that promote food security (Raponi 2016, 99). Dr Sandra Raponi, an Associate Professor at Merrimack College, is a notable advocate in this regard. She argues that the right to adequate food “should be recognized as a human right, that it can and should be legally enforced, and that doing so is practicable and justiciable” (Raponi 2016, 113). Legal frameworks, especially constitutional recognition, are vital tools for creating legal rights that individuals can use to ensure accountability from states (Lambek 2015, 69).

Though the food banks in the U.S. have provided relief to millions of Americans since their inception, Andy Fisher, co-founder of the Community Food Security Coalition, argues that the right to food provides a significant improvement over the

current needs-based, moral imperative-oriented discourse, in which hunger is appealed to food bank donors' sentimentality instead of their sense of justice (Fisher 2017, 36). The right ensures accountability of the government in taking measures to make progress in the fight to end hunger. Today government entities collect data on food insecurity, but there exists no legal mandate to implement policies or programs to reduce it (Fisher 2017, 37). There is currently no connection between the measurement of the problem and an implementation of a plan to fix it. The anti-hunger movement has not yet been able to convert the tens of millions of persons that are food insecure, receiving food stamps, or relying on food banks into an effective grassroots movement.

Due to its fundamental nature, critique of the right to food has been largely limited, yet some common misconceptions remain pervasive. A common misconception persists that social and economic rights indicate the direct provision of services and food for everyone. Correspondingly, the government must solve all social ills related to poverty and deprivation (Chilton 2009). Fundamental human rights are predicated upon on the idea that social, economic, and political structures should support populations and individuals in providing for themselves. In more precise terms, the right to food equals the right to expect reasonable opportunities to provide food of nutritious quality. Logically, then, the government's role is to facilitate these opportunities (Chilton 2009). The rights approach helps to identify methods of codifying a national effort to end poverty and hunger, to provide a framework for positive change, and to provide a means for monitoring this progress. A further misconception remains that, within the United States, involuntary lack of access to food should be solved with charity. The idea of charity for solving food insecurity and hunger is a needs-based approach to food. This approach assumes that people who lack access to food are passive recipients in need of direct assistance. A needs-based approach does not require informed legislation, political will, and coordinated action as opposed to a rights-based approach, which creates enabling environments that support people in nourishing themselves while providing a structure for legal recourse. A rights-based approach focuses on ways in which conditions and environments can be altered so that people take an active role in procuring alleviating their food insecurity (Chilton 2009).

Employing right to food when addressing food insecurity is increasingly necessary. Rights discourse is empowering. According to Joel Feinberg, the activity of rights assertion promotes self-respect and gives sense to the notion of human dignity (Feinberg 1970, 257). Further, Raponi adds:

> Instead of waiting and hoping that others will fulfil their moral duties, and instead of simply waiting and hoping that institutions will try to enforce these duties, when we have a right to something against governments and other agents, we can stand up and demand that our rights be protected. Rights discourse empowers those who would otherwise be vulnerable and helpless to demand that those in positions of power enact policies that ensure access to adequate food (Raponi 2016, 112).

Alongside this rationale resides the fact that rights assertion is effective. The mobilizing language of rights allows for individuals to regard situations where people do not have adequate food as a human rights violation. This can motivate others to take action and criticize governments and other relevant agents and institutions (Raponi 2016, 112). By way of rights-based discourse, individuals may approach a court of law to claim that their rights have been violated. These actions serve to develop the necessary legal frameworks and judicial culture that is required to ensure that a right is justiciable.

Whether or not the provision of adequate food is seen as a right could determine the ways that people approach the aid system and even the demand for the innovation of food security policy. Using human rights to achieve social change is often appealing because rights cannot be derogated from, are non-alienable, and demand action from government (Lambek 2015, 73). The opportunity to use the human rights framework to promote right to food in the United States lies in the critical step of building a groundswell of people, including the food insecure, emergency food providers, food producers, consumers, and activists, to change the narrative about what it would take to end hunger (Grunbaum 2016). The Food and Agriculture Organization proclaims that, when looking to implement the right to food as a conduit for change, information is the first step (FAO 2007).

# CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODS

## 3.1 DESIGN

Most of the above authors, Poppendieck, Riches, Smita Narula, and the Food and Agriculture Organization included, argue that the right to food cannot be used as a means for activism without increased attention by those involved in food aid. Yet if this tool is to be utilized incite progress it is necessary to determine if those involved in the food aid process today are even aware of it.

To uncover the empirical understanding of the reality that the right to food represents, this study features a case study of one food bank serving a sector of America known for its economic vulnerability. A case study is a "systematic inquiry into an event or set of related events which aims to describe and explain the phenomenon of interest" (Zucker 2009). Furthermore, case studies support the deconstruction and subsequent reconstruction of the given phenomena. They are useful in providing a creative alternative to traditional approaches to description by emphasizing the participant's perspective as integral to the research process. A single case study is ideal for considering the selected examples of a social entity within its normal context (Zucker 2009). Case studies provide a moving, representative description of phenomena, in this case the human right to food and the reality of food insecurity in the United States. With this in mind, utilizing methods such as interviews and focus groups allow for a critical and informed evaluation of the research question under consideration.

The term 'food insecurity' refers to the United States Department of Agriculture's measure of the lack of access to enough food to lead an active and healthy life. Today there is a gap in U.S. food security research wherein most of this attention is focused on urban spaces. The reality of widespread poverty and hunger in rural areas is often largely left from the conversation (Piontak & Schulman 2014, 75). Regionally, households in the South-eastern region of the United States have the highest rates of food insecurity, and this region includes a large quantity of rural areas (Piontak & Schulman 2014, 75). Rural areas, often less visible, possess equal social problems to those found in inner cities, yet with additional constraints, such as access to marketplaces and transportation. In a 2011

study of the 703 highest poverty counties in the U.S., 81% were non-metro, and were located primarily in the South (Piontak & Schulman 2014, 76).

In 2015, the USDA determined that taking into account "margins of error of the State and U.S. estimates, the prevalence of food insecurity was higher (i.e. statistically significant) than the national average in 12 states, Tennessee being among them" (USDA 2015, 17). Appalachia is a region of the United States encompassing the span of the Appalachian Mountains, from New York to Georgia. Its population faces three times the national poverty rate, lack of access to medical and dental care, widespread hunger, and the shortest lifespan in the country. The 'core' or 'central' portion of the Appalachian region, from West Virginia to Mississippi, is in possession of its own culture, historical relevancy, and socio-economic context. Tennessee's eastern region is completely enclosed by the Appalachian Mountains.

In 1978, as part of a special report on American Poverty, ABC News reporter Diane Sawyer referred to Appalachia as a 'hidden America' (ABC News 2009). Cara Robinson of Tennessee State University cites Central Appalachia as "a disenfranchised subculture within American society that has been referred to as an internal 'colony'" (Robinson 2015, 76). Residents of the region have lower rates of education, lower income, higher levels of obesity and disease, and less access to long-term, stable wages and employment than the majority of American communities. Appalachia contributes a distinct culture to the American landscape. Such qualities as the geographic segregation of the region, economic stagnation, and integral family networks have created isolated communities rooted in the values of Christian Protestantism, familial kinship, community pride and fatalism (Robinson 2015, 76). A history of crushing poverty and lagging development has resulted in a population shackled to the farming, coal-mining, lumber, and seasonal tourism. Though many Appalachians have abandoned the region in pursuit of better opportunities, 25.4 million people remain (ARC 2014).

There remains what is referred to as the 'big five' of the food assistance programs administered by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), and combined they represent 96 per cent of the department's food assistance expenditure (Poppendieck 2014, 403). The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is unquestionably the largest, with 42.6 million people enrolled in 2017 (SNAP 2017). There are 30.3

million schoolchildren partaking in the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and the School Breakfast Program (SBP) per day (NSLP 2017). Over 8 million mothers, infants and young children are enrolled in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) today (WIC 2017). The Child and Adult Care Feeding Program (CACFP) provides meals to day-cares around the United States. There are 15 separate nutrition assistance programs provided by the USDA, and targeted others in separate federal agencies. The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) is responsible for several senior nutrition programs. In the United States, programs that provide this family of aid are collectively known as 'General Assistance' (GA). The federal expenditure for the SNAP program was 37 billion in 2016, over twice the amount provided via the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program, most commonly referred to as 'welfare' (OFA 2017). Adults without children are not considered eligible for TANF and if they have not qualified for disability services, they must resort to state and local services for coverage after unemployment benefits run out. Just 30 out of 50 states offer any form of cash assistance for adults without children.

The United States now provides much of its assistance to the poor in the form of food rather than supplemental income, a practice that would be regarded as inefficient and stigmatizing in most other affluent nations (Poppendieck 2014, 413). The complexity of the welfare reforms of the mid-1990s and beyond have resulted in an environment of very limited income transfers, with food assistance programs providing a major source of household support (Poppendieck 2014, 405). SNAP is indisputably the largest of these programs. Eligibility for the SNAP is dependent on the nation's poverty threshold. Participants are offered a series of deductions based on their circumstances. In order to qualify for benefits, participants' net incomes after deductions must be below the national poverty threshold, and the size of the benefit is calculated by how far beneath the threshold they fall. The harsh realities of government assistance led 46 million Americans to seek out food banks and associated agencies for additional support. Though charitable food assistance is fiscally inferior to the reach of government programs, it occupies a large portion in the U.S. anti-hunger landscape (Poppendieck 2014, 412). Critics have asserted that SNAP benefits are too low to enable participants to reach a point of food

security, and eligibility thresholds are too low to allow for widespread access to programs.

Despite the girth of federal expenditure on food assistance and the breadth of participation, if one types 'fighting hunger in America' into almost any search engine, one is then led to the websites of private, charitable organizations, not to the government programs that provide the largest majority of U.S. food assistance (Poppendieck 2014, 413). The vast hardship that followed an era of social service cutbacks initiated by President Ronald Reagan in the 1990's resulted in the proliferation and expansion of private, charitable food assistance via food pantries and soup kitchens, otherwise known as 'Emergency Food Providers' (Poppendieck 2014, 417). The charitable food system was further developed by the invention of food banks, large warehouse style facilities that receive bulk donations of food from food producers and retail partners. Food banks store bulk quantities of food and redistribute them to kitchens, pantries, and other associated agencies.

John van Hengel opened the first food bank in Phoenix, Arizona in 1967. A retired businessman, Hengel had been volunteering at a soup kitchen when he met a young mother who admitted that she regularly searched through trash bins behind grocery stores to find food. She mentioned that there should be a place where discarded food could be stored for people who needed it, similar to how "banks" store money for future use (Feeding America 2017). By 1977, food banks had been established in 18 cities across the country. Once called America's Second Harvest, Feeding America, born in Phoenix, is now the largest hunger relief organization in the United States with 200 partner food banks. Together, they feed 46 million people each year, including 12 million children and 7 million seniors (Feeding America 2017). In 2016, Feeding America provided 4 billion meals to America's food insecure and they rescued over 2.8 billion in what would have been food waste (Feeding America 2016). In their 2014 "Hunger in America" report, Feeding America reported 43.1 million people living in poverty in the United States, and, based on annual income, 72% of the households utilizing Feeding America food banks lived at or below poverty level with a median annual income of $9,175 (Feeding America 2014).

This dissertation involves single case study of one food bank because of the appropriate scope that it offers in addressing the themes of the research questions in conjunction with the coinciding argument. If one is to determine the extent to which consciousness of the right to food exists among participants in the food aid process, interacting with said participants is the most logical and effective way to investigate one's claim. East Tennessee provides a unique and relevant domain in which to investigate the right to food. Second Harvest Food Bank of East Tennessee, a member of the Feeding America network, is a non-profit organization which distributes donated and purchased food to 18 counties in East Tennessee, including: Anderson, Blount, Campbell, Cumberland, Claiborne, Cocke, Fentress, Grainger, Hamblen, Jefferson, Loudon, Monroe, Morgan, Scott, Roane, Knox, Sevier, and Union. Second Harvest currently serves an estimated 202,613 unique individuals annually through partnerships with 325 food pantries, homeless shelters and other agencies, as well as the 265 schools belonging to Food for Kids and Summer Food for Kids programs. Second Harvest's mission well defines the ideology behind its operations and programs:

> Second Harvest works to eliminate hunger in our 18-county service area. We provide food, services, and educations to meet the nutritional needs of all people at risk of hunger, and we attack the root causes of hunger through education and nutrition. Second Harvest obtains and distributes over 18 million pounds of food per year through programs such as Food Rescue, Food for Kids, Food Sourcing, Elder Food, Mobile Pantries, and Rural Route Delivery.

As of 2017, Second Harvest has provided food to its targeted service area for 35 years.

Second Harvest's programs were designed to reach every demographic residing in its 18 counties. Through the Food Rescue program, fresh, perishable, and leftover prepared food is "rescued" from local grocers, food producers, restaurants, bakeries, and caterers for immediate distribution to soup kitchens, shelters, rehab programs, and community centres. Food Sourcing, which provides the bulk of distributed poundage, involves procuring packaged and canned food and distributed through Second Harvest's warehouse to food pantries who directly serve the clients of agencies and children in partner schools. The Food for Kids program consists of distributing backpacks of supplemental food each Friday to over 12,000 children at risk of weekend hunger at 265

East Tennessee schools. Within the Summer Food for Kids program, bags of food are distributed to children participating in our summer feeding programs in their relative schools. Through Mobile Pantry, one-day truckload distributions of emergency food are dispensed to people in under-served areas. In the same vein, Rural Route Delivery involves regular deliveries being made to outlying rural agency partners who do not have the equipment or staff or volunteers to pick up food at Second Harvest's warehouse. Finally, Senior Outreach ensures that supplemental food is allocated and delivered to home-bound and/or disabled seniors through a partnership with Senior Citizens Home Assistance Service and other non-profits committed to serving the elderly. During the federal year 2016, Second Harvest delivered 18.9 million pounds of food to its service area via these programs.

Understanding the junction between human rights and food insecurity cannot be done without the insight of those currently participating in the food aid system. Qualitative research involves the collection, analysis, and interpretation of data that may not be reduced to numbers. This data relates the social world and the concepts and behaviours of the people operating within it (Anderson 2011). Qualitative research aims to understand why people think, feel, react and operate in the way that they do. This provides for an open-ended approach that may adapt and alter as a specific issue is explored. Food insecurity, and, in a broader sense, the assertion of human rights, may best be comprehended by involving those who have been forced to experience it. By way of this study, Second Harvest’s employees, clients, and associated experts will be given the chance to propagate their unique perspectives of the right to food. In doing so, they helped to provide the lens through which we may analyse the subsistence of a fundamental human right in one of the world’s most developed states.

## 3.2 METHODS

By conducting semi-structured interviews with various members of the food aid system (including the directors of agency partners and employees of Second Harvest) it was possible to appreciate and conceptualize the experiences gained from administering food charity in response to right to food. The sampling chosen for this research project was able to provide the most relevant and informed perspectives of this issue. Working

with organizations that provide services to specific populations is a useful way to generate a sample of individuals serving isolated and marginalized populations. Because these individuals are not employed by any state or federal body, they possess insight into the practice of using non-profit aid to confront a human rights issue.

In addition to conducting interviews of the employees of Second Harvest Food Bank and its associated agencies, this project features two focus groups composed of food agency clients. Participants in these focus groups were all over the age of 18 and possessing the competence necessary to understand and provide consent. In order to promote discussion among participants, the focus groups were semi-structured in practice. Additionally, they were conducted with utmost care of the participants involved. While the environment and activities involved in participation in a focus group may sometimes be insensitive, intrusive, and distressing, participants in this data was accessed via gatekeepers dedicated to their clients' protection and wellbeing. The agency relations staff of Second Harvest Food Bank and associated agency directors served as gatekeepers when forming and conducting the focus groups used in this project. These individuals serve clients directly, and are officially responsible for their care and protection while they are utilizing support services. Their input and discretion allowed me to conduct research that complies with the ethical standards required to collect valid and effective data. Negatively affecting participants in any way stands in direct contrast with the objectives of this dissertation.

This study utilizes focus groups because they allow participants to interact. They listen, reflect, and further consider their own standpoint. Individual responses may become refined as a discussion progresses. The formation of these groups was necessary to conduct research regarding the spontaneity that arises from a stronger social context, and garnering data that is less influenced by interaction with the researcher. By design, focus groups reflect the normative influences, collective and individual self-identity, and shared meanings that are an important part of the way that we perceive, experience, and understand the world around us. The data gathered via this method is being used to highlight the similarities and discrepancies of the experiences and perspectives present among individuals seeking food aid, and therefore provide further insight? into the relevancy of right to food when receiving supplemental food aid.

I remained employed as a Grant Writer by Second Harvest Food Bank of East Tennessee during the course of this study. Interview participants also employed by Second Harvest Food Bank of East Tennessee serve as my direct supervisors. Second Harvest is a Feeding America affiliate, and the agencies where focus groups were conducted are partner agencies of the food bank. Interviews were conducted with the understanding that any professional relationships or associations were to be disregarded for the purposes of this research. Furthermore, I made clear that any responses to interview questions will have no bearing on the personal feelings, attitudes, or professionalism maintained within my relationships with interviewees.

The focus groups did not involve dependency in any way. My role as a grant writer does not involve contact with partner agencies and their clients, so subjects mostly did not recognize me as a Second Harvest employee. When asked, I responded truthfully, and Second Harvest agency relations staff were available to verify that none of the duties associated with my position had any effects on their partnerships with Second Harvest. I operated as an independent researcher in all capacities. All information and perspectives provided by Second Harvest were completely separated with my job title and any job functionalities. I did not use any information or data used in grant writing for the purposes of this project without the express permission of Second Harvest.

## 3.3 ETHICS

Consent was established via a detailed overview of a provided plain language statement and consent form and clear answers to any questions any participant may have. Participant interviews were conducted at Second Harvest Food Bank of East Tennessee, or, if not an employee of the food bank, at their respective workplace, during its hours of operation. Interview participants were recruited via the use of agency and Second Harvest professional email addresses. Interviews were conducted privately and on a voluntary basis, with an established understanding of the research project and their consent.

The focus groups were conducted at the associated agencies, during its hours of operation. Focus group participants were informed of the fact that their responses did not affect their relationships with agency and Second Harvest staff in any way. This project seeks to gather diverse perspectives, regardless of the nature of their origins. In order to

avoid any issues associated with immigration legality, focus group participants were only recruited from agencies that require the presentation of lawful personal identification in order to receive services. All respondents were over the age of 18, and fully able to understand and provide consent. They were also proficient in the understanding of the English language. Assessments of consent capacity were conducted by agency directors to further ensure the full cognitive competency. All participants were given my contact information should they choose to reach out at a later time.

Because of the interactive nature of focus groups, complete confidentiality could not be guaranteed. Individuals participating in a focus groups heard what the other participants said, and there was no feasible recourse for repeating information. Before the focus group began, I informed participants of this fact, and gave them the chance to remove themselves if they wished to. I reminded them that all of the information they contribute is provided completely voluntarily by them, and they were in no way required to disclose details that they were uncomfortable with others hearing. I also reminded them that as a researcher, my confidentiality is determined by the limits of the law, and that I remain obligated to report any disclosed ongoing illegal activities. I believe that honesty in these regards provided an atmosphere of security and confidence for participants, as they were able to control their own testimonies and which details they chose to divulge.

To ensure the health and safety of all participants, I conducted both focus groups and interviews at established locations during that locations operating hours. Both interviews and focus groups were conducted in Second Harvest and agency establishments, where there are functioning security cameras and staff protocols should they be required. To minimize distress, I distributed information upon request for access to available support and health services. During the interviews and focus groups, I reminded participants that they were required to provide any information that they do not wish to, and that they could leave the interview or focus group at any time.

## 3.4 ANALYSIS

Analysis of the data was performed by transcribing the data as it was spoken during the interviews and focus groups. All interviews and focus groups were recorded

with consent of the participants, so as to accurately recall what was said by both the participants and the primary researcher. Nonverbal communication, such as laughter and emotion, appears in the transcriptions as well, due to the importance of nonverbal data in understanding others (Jenks 2011, 72). Because this project features a case study design, qualitative methods allowed for an assessment of the data characterized by interpretation (Maxwell 2013, 79). The analysis was conducted with an interpretive approach, which involved understanding the transcriptions in accordance with the prevalent themes of this project: the knowledge of human rights, consciousness of the right to food, assigning responsibility for the right to food, and the description of thoughts and feelings from one's role within the food aid system.

# CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Second Harvest has 35 employees, working in operations, development, programs, and administration. Six employees were selected to participate in semi-structured interviews and were chosen due to the specific insight they could offer to the topic of the study at hand. Two agency administrators were chosen due to their experience with clients in distinct locations within Second Harvest's 18-county service area. Beacon of Hope and Sevier County Food Ministry served as the sites of two focus groups, one with nine participants and the next with seven. Both focus groups were conducted in order to gather the perspectives of food aid recipients regarding this specific issue.

## 4.1 THE FOOD AID ADMINISTRATORS

In-person, semi-structured interviews with food aid administrators took place between June 2017 and July 2017. Prior to initiating data collection, these individuals were identified by the functionality of their specific roles within Second Harvest Food Bank and its associated agencies. The interviews were semi-structured in nature and for the most part resembled a conversation. Four unique questions were addressed in each interview: (1) what is your knowledge of human rights; (2) have you heard of the right to food; (3) who do you think is responsible for fulfilling the right to food; and, (4) do you think that there are deficiencies at the state and federal level regarding food insecurity. Further queries were made regarding the function of each participant's role inside Second Harvest. My objective in choosing these questions and those more specific to participant viewpoints regarding their individual operations within Second Harvest was to address the primary research questions: Is there a consciousness of the human right to food among food aid *administrators*? And, how do they understand their role within the system? These efforts helped this study to identify and provide a fresh approach to right to food research, which allows those with the most empirical knowledge to have voices in the conversation.

## 4.2 LEADERSHIP: ELAINE AND GAIL

Having served Second Harvest since around the time of its conception in 1982, both Elaine Streno and Gail Root could be considered veterans of food aid administration. Elaine Streno is the Executive Director of Second Harvest and has been invested in the East Tennessee community for over 25 years. Gail, Director of Programs, has served Second Harvest for 20 years. Both individuals are in positions of leadership within the organization and thus provided unique insight into food bank management and food aid administration.

When asked about their knowledge of human rights, both offered standard definition. Elaine added that in her opinion "spiritually we were all put here for a purpose" and that affords everyone born on earth equitable treatment. After, both were questioned about any existing consciousness they have of the human right to food. Elaine mentioned that she was familiar, but thought it to be a more "radical idea" internationally. Gail replied with a similar answer, yet questioned its feasibility. She understood that among those working for Second Harvest there is a sustained belief in the edicts of the right to food, yet outside of our building we would not find such easy agreement when discussing it with others.

In assigning responsibility for the human right to food, Elaine affirmed a collective approach. Yet, she mentioned that some people may wilfully choose not to develop themselves, due to the fact they may feel "owed" by society as a whole. When asked if she believed there to be deficiencies at the state and federal level, she heartily agreed. Despite the good intentions of 1960's activists, today's government programs may provide an enabling system. Some programs may stagnate individuals, and prevent them from personal growth as there is no incentive to develop in a professional capacity. Gail believed that their primary focus was on floating the food insecure and not fully eradicating hunger, and further that "ending hunger is a little lofty for a government agency." Upon the inclusion of President Ronald Reagan's policies, the USDA assigned emphasis to the idea of less government and more non-profits. She disagreed with this mind-set, citing that, if anything, the responsibility should have been equal. She asserted

that the missions of integrated non-profits and churches should now at least be supported by the government philosophically if not monetarily,

Originally called "Share," Elaine included, Second Harvest functioned via the efforts of "five to six people and inmates." They delivered food with two trucks, some of which their agencies didn't even want. It wasn't successful and it wasn't effective. The board members of Second Harvest seemingly turned the tides. Progressive board members knew that, though Second Harvest had barely any capital, sometimes it is necessary to spend money to make money. If they had not supported such approaches, Second Harvest would never had moved beyond the 3 million pounds it managed to distribute during her first year as an employee. After finishing the 2016 fiscal year with 19 million pounds distributed, she would like to think that Second Harvest is more successful now and more effective, but that doesn't mean that Second Harvest is "doing it all right" yet. Despite the organization's current success, significant flaws in the system continue to negatively impact the food insecure.

> *"I know that there are a lot of people that can't feed their children. And I can't say this on television. I would if I could, but I can't. Non-profit directors are not supposed to have political opinions. And I could never state what I really feel in our 18-county service area, because we'd lose 20% of our donors," Elaine, individual interview.*

Gail expressed a similar viewpoint. She conveyed confidence in Second Harvest's ability to make a difference. To do so, it will have to keep evolving until "hopefully (they) get it right." There is a looming threat of obstacles to come.

> *"Things are going to dry up, and, when they do, it's, it's people like us that are gonna figure it out, and figure out what we're going to do to get food. And we're going to do it. And how do we get healthier food, and, for twenty years I've seen huge changes in what we're doing," Gail, individual interview.*

Both Gail and Elaine seemed to understand the remarkable impact that Second Harvest has made by supporting the most vulnerable members of its service area. However, they both also chose to express the gravity of what this organization is asked to do, and the great potential of existing variables to halt the progress they've worked so hard to maintain.

## 4.3 PROGRAMS: RUTH AND SAM

Second Harvest distributes food to specific demographics by way of its six targeted programs. Despite storing millions of pounds in its Maryville, TN location, clients do not take food directly from the food bank's warehouse. Ruth Ivey, Agency Relations Manager and employee for 13 years, oversees partnerships with approximately 250 agency partners scattered throughout Second Harvest's service area. Sam Compton, Youth Programs Manager and Second Harvest employee for 14 years, operates the Food for Kids program, which provides supplemental food to over 12,000 children each year.

Upon being asked of his knowledge of human rights, Sam responded that he understands human rights to be a set of basic rights that all human beings are entitled to and that are nearly universally agreed upon. This includes the human rights to have access to the most basic human needs of food, shelter, clothing, and a recognition that all people should be treated equally under the law. He believes that a modern society's respect for human rights should directly correlate with that society's overall success. When asked after their appreciation of the right to food, both reported that they had heard the term before. "If you're a human and you can eat food," Ruth stated, "food should be available to you." Sam expressed similar sentiment.

> *"I'm under the impression that those suffering from food insecurity are regularly without one of the most basic human rights and, where one human right is denied, there are likely several others being denied at the same time," Sam, individual interview.*

Who is responsible for fulfilling the human right to food? "You are responsible for yourself," Ruth replied, "and sometimes you have to call on people for help." She does not believe that the state should solely be responsible for taking care of her. The state should be responsible for ensuring that we as a society have food sources. People should have access to dairy, meat, and vegetables. When asked if she believed there to be deficiencies at the state and federal level, she responded with care for the clients Second Harvest serves.

> *"People still help you now but sometimes the world is cruel and there can be judgmental and non-understanding, they don't understand the circumstances. But*

> *I love knowing that what we do is improving our world," Ruth, individual interview.*

However, she added that there should be limitations. SNAP funding should only allow participants to buy certain items, which she believes could potentially change the amount of medical issues that agencies see in their clients. Before recent cuts, she would hear from food pantries that they were seeing less people and they didn't know why. She has seen pantries close from lack of use, which food administrators equate to progress. However, she disclosed that she's beginning to worry because more government funding has been cut, and the clients are beginning to return. Despite this, there's not "a single soul working for Second Harvest that doesn't care" and who is not committed to working to their full capability to ensure that the work gets done. If cuts increase, and the new proposed budget is adopted, she affirmed "we're going to work at it and try to be there."

Sam communicated that there are deficiencies in the approach to any issue involving food and health by the agribusinesses that created policy.

> *"Well, technically, policy is set at "the state and federal level" by elected officials, but many people understand why corporate interests and government interests seem to be in lock step. In short, government reacts to being lobbied, pure and simple. And those lobbying on behalf of marginalized groups, such as the food insecure, have a fraction of the money to buy influence than do businesses with higher profits than the entire GDP of many nations. Basically, businesses whose food products poison their customers and drive up healthcare costs for everyone have a singular motivation (pause) and it isn't in creating a society that becomes increasingly healthier," Sam, individual interview.*

It all depends on what "crystal ball economic trends" are in play. Either way, he sees an increase in the ability of organizations like Second Harvest to help more people in more ways. However, the "vagaries of the largest economy in the world" have a far greater potential impact than can be accounted for by the current players. Potentially, if Second Harvest were to see an influx of a lot more players in the arena of food aid and it takes the lead on coordinating that effort, "we may even be able to hold the line in face of a significant economic downturn, while actually degrading the problem in a significant way as economic conditions improve." He divulged that when he's in a place of

understanding the opportunity he has to do this kind of work and how it fits in to the over-arching ideas he has about “right mindfulness” and personal obligation to the whole, the approach is different. He believes in a natural fulfilment that accompanies social animals coming to understand their individual role in an effort larger than themselves. This is true in a number of philanthropic endeavours, but for him, that fulfilment dramatically increases as one becomes part of an initiative to help others with a most basic human right.

## 4.4 DEVELOPMENT: RACHEL AND AARON

Second Harvest could not function without capital. A fully operating warehouse, trucks, staff, equipment, supplies, and most importantly food, are vital in maintaining the immensity of its operating capabilities. Of its $7 million operating budget, $4.5 million is obtained via a development team comprised of two grant writers, an event planner, volunteer and food drive coordinators, a donor relations specialist, a support supervisor, a development coordinator, a development director, and one harried young intern. They facilitate hundreds of grant applications, dozens of food drives, and at least 10 large-scale events per year. Rachel Ellis, Donor Relations Coordinator and employee of 4 years, works to find and sustain support through relationships with community and corporate partners. Aaron Snukles, Development Director and employee for 6 years, oversees the team’s operations.

Rachel suggested that human rights involve treating people fairly. However, prior to her experience with Second Harvest, she had not considered applying that concept to food. In her life, food was always available to her, and her ‘food’ choices consisted of where she would eat, not if she would eat. Amused, Aaron retorted that human rights “knowledge sound(s) like a scholarship word” but offered that everyone is equal and receives equitable rights.

Rachel admitted to having no experience with the concept of right to food and asked if it was a movement. She had mostly likely seen food as a right until she understood the way that food aid works. She now considers it to be more of a cause.

Aaron knows of right to food, either by reading about it or maybe just by working in the industry. The healthy part gets cloudy, but every human is entitled to food.

> *"Rights to water, rights to breathing air, and rights to food, those are the three things you have to have to survive. So (pause) is it everywhere but it's not practiced," Aaron, individual interview.*

To Rachel, all humans are responsible for fulfilling the right to food, but it starts at the top. Just like any other business, the upper echelon is meant to guide the way. Aaron agreed, noting that the demand for Second Harvest's needs are often more that it is able to supply. At the state and federal level, there's too much red tape, and some people are not able to get through it. State officials do what they must to stay in office, so reality and rights are often cast to the side in favour of appeasing the majority. There may be enough food to feed everyone, but it's not going to the right places. Like Rachel, Aaron believes that direction must come from the top.

> *"You know, God forbid, the president, somebody, was hungry when he was younger. And got on the bandwagon, you know, one of the president's wives was 'beautify America' or this. And somebody in a top place would get on the board with us, get on the board with feeding people, and things would change…but until we get someone who can speak to everyone on our behalf, we're always gonna be swimmin' up stream," Aaron, individual interview.*

Because Second Harvest is not a government body, it must compete with other charities for donations from the private sector. Rachel's job is to work with corporate entities and convince them that they need to spend their dollars with Second Harvest, which means they "don't really necessarily care about what we do," yet she has access to great marketing opportunities that are cheaper for them. If they have a mission and a goal and they want their employees to be involved in the community, she taps into that particular.

It takes a while to build such a relationship, and then she makes them feel guilty for telling her no. She revealed that the majority of companies do not know what Second Harvest does. Even those with a passing knowledge cannot fully appreciate the extent that it provides food and whom it provides food to. Therefore, it's her job to educate them at the beginning "and really find their soft spot and pull their heart strings." Involved with

media relations and corporate relationships as well, Aaron supplied that he must present hunger in a certain light to make it an attractive cause.

> *"From a marketing standpoint, the children sells better than anything. It's real easy for me to sell children hunger, especially in East Tennessee. You know, um, because their, their hunger has been achieved by no choice of their own. (Sarcastically) An adult probably made some bad choices in their lives and ended up in a bad situation, but the child didn't, the child had no say in the matter," Aaron, individual interview.*

Rachel reflected on the practice of vying for donations as well.

> *"It's extremely difficult and I tell this to my clients all the time. Uh, hunger is something no one talks about, and my husband had cancer twice. Everybody talks about cancer. Everybody talks about Alzheimer's. You know, you know somebody with one of those situations or it's touched you in some way. Uh, with hunger, uh, I would again say that the majority of the people I'm talking to, including myself, have never actually experienced what I would consider true hunger," Rachel, individual interview.*

To garner support, she provides them with a story. She caters the story to a point of connection they may have with the issue of hunger, whether it be children, seniors, etc. and then she provides an account of an interaction she had at a Mobile Pantry visit. Sometimes, potential donors are astonished at the numbers alone. Other times, she disclosed, they just don't care.

Aaron reasoned that this could be because hunger is not an accessible issue.

> *"I talk to a lot of people and I ask them: "Do you know anybody hungry?" No. "Have you ever been hungry?" No. When you go and you say "Do you know anybody who has breast cancer?" Yes…It's a much easier, if I was working for Children's Hospital or breast cancer or wherever, AIDS awareness, whatever, it's a much more recognizable non-profit. It touches more people. We have a hard time finding somebody to go say "I was hungry when I was younger and I went to Second Harvest." (Pause) So, we have to educate and then ask. When the other guys pretty much are just asking," Aaron, individual interview.*

When asked if he believed using the right to food would gain more support, he said he could maybe add it as an addendum to the argument. However, a picture of a child and some statistics about hungry children in our area would be more convincing. He maintained that politicians are not making hunger a visible point of concern.

> "*I get frustrated talking to people going "How can you give a million dollars to the zoo when I've got children here suffering?" But then you know, I get it, you know," Aaron, individual interview.*

He mentioned that often donors consider issues to be of equal importance. Whether they are donating to feed people, save animals, or to high school football, they feel that they are giving and that's all that matters.

Rachel too was asked if she thought recruiting support via discussions of justice was a viable option. If speaking with an individual donor she believed that she could, but it would be a different scenario if addressing a company. The problem, she maintained, is a crowded market of charitable organizations all competing for the same dollar. Donor motivation may be derived from guilt or the tax write-offs, but there is a gap in their ability to comprehend issues that have never truly affected them. She took a job at Second Harvest for its reasonable work hours, but once she realized "what was happening" she became passionate. Though initially shocked, she now pushes herself to "do as much as I can, and make as much money as I can to solve this problem."

## 4.5 AGENCY PARTNERS: JIM, TRESA, AND DONA

Those employed by Second Harvest's partner agencies are the most connected to those experiencing food insecurity. Altogether, Second Harvest's partners feed over 200,000 people per year, and that number is growing. Jim Davis is the director of Sevier County Food Ministry, located in Sevierville, TN. Tresa Childs is the lead volunteer of Beacon of Hope Outreach Ministry. Towards the end of Tresa Childs' interview, Beacon of Hope's program director, Dona McConnell, joined the conversation.

Sevier County Food Ministry feeds approximately 1,600 families per week. Jim noted that the food items are primarily staples such as canned vegetables, meat, rice, dry beans, mac and cheese, etc., that they purchase from Second Harvest at an extremely

discounted price. He believes that human rights are hidden in America, due to a societal emphasis on privacy. Jim admitted to having never heard of the right to food, believing it to be merely an issue of entitlement. After an explanation, he agreed, but noted that people should do for themselves first. The foremost problem is access. Without transportation, people cannot reach those services that are meant to help them. School-aged children are not always provided for through summer programs. Those who have the ability to access services should reciprocate in some way.

> *"You also have to give back, to me, you know, and it's not just a take, take, take, it's a give and take. In a way, in a perfect world it should, it would be. But it's not perfect and it never will be," Jim, individual interview.*

Tresa asserted that people should be entitled to human rights from a moral standpoint, no matter where they're from, who they are, what their abilities and income are, just because they're human. She had never heard of the right to food until she became involved with this project, but she became confident after hearing the definition, equating it with the right to breathe.

Jim believed the government to be responsible for the right to food to an extent, but maintained that people have a responsibility to help themselves if they are capable of it. For those with a large number of children, however, it is easy to fall through the cracks. If a person is fully working to better themselves and their family, he added, then they should be receiving the support they need to stay afloat and adequately provide for themselves.

Dona claimed that everyone is responsible for fulfilling the human right to food, and brushed aside the idea of assigning responsibility to the government, due to its inefficiency. Tresa agreed, but called for increased policy to help protect those enrolled in government programs. Yet as human beings, she maintained, we are all ultimately responsible for each other. There are deficiencies at the state and federal level due to a lack of empirical knowledge about issues like hunger. For those who work directly with the food insecure, it is easier to comprehend the day-to-day choices they are forced to make.

> *"Do you know you're going to have food? Do you know you're going to have enough food for everybody in your family? Do you have to feed the kids first and*

> *if there's food left over you get that? Do you go for the cheapest food that you possibly can get? What can you get with SNAP and what can you not get with SNAP? How do you stretch that and make that work? All within being human beings, with all of us having our own food preferences of taste and preparation style and all that," Tresa, individual interview.*

Beacon of Hope's model allows individuals to progress within their lives and move towards food security. In providing food, it allows them the freedom to address other pertinent issues, such as being able to pay for medical treatment and transportation.

Jim began working for Sevier County Food Ministries so that it could keep helping his neighbours who are in need.

> *"And, uh, maximize how much we can help. I mean we can probably do a lot more but we're doing, we're building it up slowly. To me that's what it was about for me, you know, why am I doing it, most people think of a non-profit as man that's tough but I love it you know, and it's all about the volunteers and bringing people together to help people who don't have as much as we do, who are less fortunate," Jim, individual interview.*

Tresa was drawn to Beacon of Hope because of the relationships that it facilitates. She had volunteered for other organizations in the past, but felt unable to connect with the plethora of individuals using its services. As a Christian, she feels like it's what she is meant to be doing. All people are meant to recognize others as fellow human beings, and work collectively to keep them from harm.

## 4.6 THE FOOD AID RECIPIENTS

Semi-structured focus groups with food aid recipients took place in July 2017. Prior to initiating data collection, focus group participants were chosen by gatekeepers as fitting the outlined requirements necessary for participation. The focus group too took the form of a conversation, yet with less input from the primary researcher. To gain a better understanding of the comprehension and experiences of each participant, it was necessary to give them the space to speak with each other and connect via their mutual beliefs and concerns. The four questions highlighted in each interview ((1) what is your knowledge of human rights; (2) have you heard of the right to food; (3) who do you think is responsible for fulfilling the right to food; and, (4) do you think that there are deficiencies at the state and federal level regarding food insecurity) were asked during both focus groups.

## 4.7 BEACON OF HOPE

Beacon of Hope, located in Knoxville, TN, is a cooperative ministry between Church Street United Methodist Church, Vestal United Methodist Church, Mountain View United Methodist Church, First Baptist, and Lake Hill Presbyterian Church. It is one agency that receives food from Second Harvest Food Bank. Knoxville, with a population of just over 180,000, is considered an urban environment. Its historic South quadrant is known for its lack of resources and is considered the least safe section of the city. Beacon of Hope's ideology is centred around empowering those suffering from poverty. The food co-op is comprised of around 25 families, resembling a small community. These families pay a nominal membership fee and small monthly fees ($3) to cover non-food expenses. They are expected to participate through service, which involves unloading and sorting food, keeping the food area tidy, and participating in devotional sessions.

The focus group conducted for this project was held in a dim church basement and consisted of nine participants, the primary researcher, and Tresa and Dona. The

atmosphere upon arriving was one of familiar ease. Participants were clearly friends, asking for updates and swapping stories, and appeared comfortable in their environment.

When asked about their knowledge of human rights, many responded. One participant commented that rights reminded her of Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil rights movement. Another professed the belief in equality for all children of God. After a few minutes, another participant added that human rights made her think of faraway places, such as Syria and other places in Europe. None of them had heard of the right to food, but they responded positively when it was explained.

> *"One of the things that we talk about in (muffled) is, everyone being at the table representing. That we have, um, the poverty, the middle class, and the wealthy. And I think it's important that at any time, that's who needs to be making the choices. We know that middle class makes decisions while the wealthy, high up, don't let us have a say (mumbling) but I think people going and making these concerns heard, but, it's just like you were saying, yeah, those things are, you know. But if we're going to change it we have to have a voice," Participant, Focus Group 1.*

In response, a participant mentioned that the organizations available to help had to fight to be funded themselves. Dona expressed doubt about how "helpful" the food stamp system is and was met with sweeping agreement.

> *"Dona: The food stamp issue, is it's like a mystery. I see one family of four who gets $492, one family of four that gets $62. I don't know how they figure it out.*
>
> *P1: A lot of it is based on your income and the things that you have that you can sell, for instance your vehicle that you need to get around. You know, if it's worth a lot and you can sell it. It belongs to you. You're not paying for it. That counts against you.*
>
> *P2: Those are the discrepancies where we need to be a voice, cause it's not fair. You need a car. No matter how much you get. But, again, persons who are wealthy and middle class have no idea you know. They don't. They don't know much about poverty."*

When the subject of government programs commenced, more people felt empowered to share their stories.

> *"Several years ago, my husband, and he works every day, but he was in the hospital four times in six months because he had diverticulitis. When he had to be out of work, because he had to have surgery, I went to get help to pay our light bill, or tried to, because he had tried to work, we made $8 too much that month. That's where the discrepancies are," Participant, Focus Group 1.*

Upon being asked to assign responsibility, nearly every participant offered disdain for the current system. In regards to employment, many expressed frustration for the exclusionary requirements that individuals must meet to qualify for government programs. One cannot make above a certain amount per year and remain in the SNAP program, regardless of the variables that may be contributing to their inability to sustain food security.

> *"Tresa: And we see that where people are getting a job and, but they don't get enough hours to qualify for benefits, much less liveable wage. And so, it's, like you were saying, it keeps people, the corporations don't have to pay the benefits, insurance, all of that kind of stuff, but you make enough that you drop off the system.*
>
> *P1: And you have to weigh that, you know. Is it worth me going to work? Because I'm not gonna make, and that's what they don't look at. There's not, it's not that people do not want to work. It's not that people don't want to work. It's that, I'll go to work, but I'm not gonna have insurance, and I'm not gonna make enough money to subsidize all this stuff.*
>
> *P2: I fill in all the papers, sit there for four and a half hours, waitin' on my appointment, she said. "well I got you $38 a month," and I said "Oh wow, thanks a lot." She said, "Well, you could have a couple of kids." And I said, "Lady, I'm 60 years old.""*

Though one participant added that every human was responsible for fulfilling the right to food, there was a consensus that current aspects of government programs are

making their situations worse. Government programs do not take into account the higher prices of healthy food items, or other important factors that are relevant to food shopping.

*"P1: I think it should be, like he said, tax free. That, that could go on the government. They should have lower prices, which would fall on the government, per store, depending on the store. Because you can't, because somebody, even if you get $470 something dollars in food stamps, which I don't, uh, when, when you have, when you have three children, yes you want to feed 'em healthy. But there is a head of cauliflower for $3 and I can go back here and get bologna and bread for $3. So, which is gonna go further? And which am I getting more money for? More for the money.*

*P2: And see, in my situation, my husband has diabetes. It blows our grocery budget to get, if we get the healthy stuff, it's more expensive, than, you know, and some things you just have to get. Because that's what you've got to do.*

*P3: And then, on WIC, we couldn't get cakes, sweets and stuff on food stamps. Well, food stamps bought my kid's birthday parties many a times, 'cause I couldn't afford the birthday party."*

Coupled with these sentiments was an overwhelming sense of gratitude for the existence of Beacon of Hope and those dedicated to its mission. Nearly all participants expressed their appreciation of Tresa and Dona. One participant mentioned that she felt as though she could trust in other people and rely on them because of the experiences she has had with charitable food aid, despite her negative experiences with government programs and employees. Moreover, Beacon of Hope's emphasis on community and continuing education provides them with a sense of agency and worth. "They're not just a handout," one participant included, "they're a hand up."

## 4.8 SEVIER COUNTY FOOD MINISTRY

Sevier County Food Ministry serves around 1,600 families a week. Sevier County is a semi-renowned tourist destination, home to country singer Dolly Parton's theme

park, Dollywood. Sevier County is comprised of nearly 96,000 people (U.S. Census Bureau 2017) and, due to Great Smoky Mountains National Park (the most visited national park in the United States), receives over 11 million visitors per year (NPS 2017). With an infrastructure almost entirely dependent on seasonal tourism, Sevier County is characterized by rural poverty. Lack of access to resources and viable employment has resulted in over 12,000 people categorized as food insecure (MMG 2015).

The day that the focus group was held the heat index revealed an outdoor temperature of 90° F, with little to no cloud cover. Sevier County Food Ministry opened its doors at 2:00 PM, and people began lining up to get in at around noon. With the consent of all involved, the focus group was conducted on the porch of the ministry and was comprised of 7 individuals, all strangers.

Participants' knowledge of human rights was derived primarily from the media. Participants mentioned understanding the freedom of speech, and added that they have heard of human rights abuses in specific locations, such as Syria and Russia. Much like the first focus group, participants had no knowledge of human rights, and all but one individual heartily agreed with their existence.

> *"All these farmers 'round here, they let the food layin' right on the ground. And, and Trump, Trump don't care if we live or die in Sevier County. Like FEMA when we had the fire, they didn't want to bring any trailers in here for people, because of the terrorists. Don't get me started neither, 'cause no. They don't care if we live or die," Participant, Focus Group 2.*

Again, much like the first focus group, they felt that the problem of food insecurity is rooted in the way in which government agencies approach food.

> *"P1: They don't care if we're healthy.*
>
> *P2: Ourselves, we, um, we petition enough, like, I personally don't think food should cost anything, like, it shouldn't.*
>
> *P3: There should not be tax on food.*
>
> *P1: Yeah there shouldn't be tax on food but it's the government and they want to make money. That's all they care about. They could care less that we're sittin' out here in 90-degree heat. You know, havin' to get food from here, no. They don't care."*

Moreover, many did not feel as though their health is actively taken into account. One participant mentioned that she was sick and could not afford the healthy food she was required by her doctor to have. Another participant, clearly exhausted from the heat, quietly agreed.

*"I'm dying of cancer. I need insurance. They give me $16 a month in food stamps. (pause), (emotional) They could care less. I go to the hospital to eat,"*

*Participant, Focus Group 2.*

After a few moments, a participant voiced gratitude for Sevier County Food Ministry. Many others offered appreciation for the United States, despite their feelings about government entities. A participant mentioned meeting an immigrant from Cuba who worked with her at a local grocery store. She was shocked at the amount of food available to people, and the seemingly endless selection of even the smallest items. Witnessing this made the participant feel blessed for all that she has been given. The same participant urged the others not to criticize the United States government.

*"P1: I think that um, we are very blessed right now, to have who we have in office. I, I'm speaking of Trump of course. I think that he, if anybody was gonna save this country, it's gonna be him. I think he's done a great job so far. There's things that need to be done, but I don't care and all that. But the governments just, you know, you know like congress and everything is holding him back from a lot of stuff. But I think he's gonna get around a lot of it, I really do.*

*P2: I'd like to change his opinion just a little bit on the food stamp situation. I understand there's a lot of people who abuse the food stamps. Well, whatever they do with it. I can't get food stamps and I can't work right now."*

In a broader sense, one participant suggested, the state of food insecurity is the fault of society as a whole.

*"P1: Everybody's got selfish. They don't care about what the other people want. They got what they want right there.*

*P2: It's kinda like a new world agenda."*

# CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The study of human rights is primarily debated in political, legal, academic, and philanthropic circles, as well as by officials in almost all other subjects that affect the human condition. However, without an understanding of the right to food by those who are suffering from food insecurity, it is difficult to utilize the right to food to prompt a movement towards positive change. The participants in this research study felt united to each other by their shared humanness and first-hand understanding of some of the more bitter truths about navigating the intricacies of poverty. The 'us vs them' dichotomy that separates these vital perspectives may be the greatest hindrance in solving humankind's oldest curse. At the other end of this spectrum lie the food aid administrators who wish to provide the means to help alleviate the problem, yet possess little to no empirical knowledge of hunger itself. The traits that so often accompany the many facets of poverty are often unavailable to those who are seated in the position to formally act.

The right to food, ideally, includes the development and adoption of coordinated national plans, strategies to ensure development of a comprehensive food policy that includes the setting of targets, benchmarks, and indicators, monitoring, justiciable remedies and other actions required to secure a just and sustainable food system (Fisher 2017, 34). Andrew Fisher argues that the concept of hunger as a social problem in 21st century America has "created a public mind-set that has unintentionally perpetuated the problem." Further, "it has set up solutions that mitigate the problem in the short-term and ultimately weaken its resolution in the long-term" (Fisher 2017, 33). In other words, those who donate to food banks and thus to the food insecure may only ever see them as a charitable cause and not fellow human beings demanding equal rights. In order to transform a seemingly primordial dilemma into a hot button issue, Fisher suggests an "extreme makeover." This involves utilizing current social movement rhetoric to appeal hunger to the greater population. "We could occupy (hunger)," he says, "take it back from the charitable industrial complex and reshape it towards more progressive ends." Where do we start? He answers: "The first place to consider in the occupation of hunger and anti-hunger work is the concept of the right to food" (Fisher 2017, 33). Thus, in

proliferating rights-based rhetoric in association with food insecurity, it is possible to convert a former charitable cause into a public outcry.

However, Riches maintains a bleaker vision. The 'me first' outlook of the public is the result of "a legacy of neo-liberalism extolling the virtues of market-driven economic growth through privatization, deregulated international finance, and a minimal government" (Riches 2011, 771). Everyday consumers and taxpayers do not view themselves as socially responsible citizens possessing expectations of the government having a public obligation to address the food rights of those without an adequate standard of living. Efforts to support food rights are the result of altruism, reinforcing the stereotype of hunger being an individual or family problem and a matter for charity, rather than a structural or human rights issue and point of political debate.

Riches asserts, "if there is to be a strong public commitment to eliminating hunger and reducing poverty in wealthy states, there is an urgent need for governments to think and act outside this charitable food box" (Riches 2011, 769). The richest nations of the world cannot help the poorest to achieve food security if they fail to recognize food inequality and the limits of food charity in their own backyards. Marchione and Messer argue for an ideal in which the U.S. government, "as a global proponent of human rights, would ratify and integrate international human rights rationale into all food and development policies so that they afford highest priority to the right to food" (Marchione & Messer 2010, 22). This would also allow the U.S. to assume a lead in the use of this approach internationally. Human rights doctrine establishes that all humans have inalienable entitlements, and therefore inherent dignity, that arguably cannot be satisfied with charity. The right to food need not only be classified as a legal entitlement, but also as a political and moral claim. Broad societal considerations such as gender, race, disability status, etc. may largely impact an individual's economic status. The right to food, therefore, is a powerful tool that may be used to foster equity and empowerment for those facing food insecurity.

Despite the political advantages the right to food could provide, the majority of anti-hunger groups in the United States do not utilize human rights discourse. The efforts of food banks and activists remain focused on the fourth obligation as defined in the ICESCR: *providing* food for all humans. Federal food programs and charitable food aid

support are garnered towards assisting those who cannot help themselves. However, the obligation to *fulfil* the right to food (by supporting livelihoods via fiscal and labour policies) has lacked such enthusiasm. The right to food has irrefutable value as a theoretical tool and uniting force. It could help to shift this perspective by imbuing individuals not only with that right but also with the legal framework to hold the government accountable for its obligations.

In 2007, the FAO observed that "only through effective human rights-oriented policies and coordinated rights-based strategies can duty bearers fulfil their obligation to enable rights holders to feed themselves" (FAO 2007). To accomplish this, any policy that affects the right to food should be designed to address the underlying causes of poverty and hunger. Thus far, the right to food has largely failed as a legal tool or human rights instrument. This is attributed to the fact that the idea of the right to food has not captured the collective imagination of communities. The logic of the literature implies that the right to food may be realized first by transforming the narrative in which This narrative cannot be altered if the food aid recipients it was created to benefit are completely unaware of its existence. Likewise, this narrative cannot be used as a mechanism for advocacy and activism if it negatively affects food aid administrators' ability to do their jobs.

# CONCLUSION

As an addendum to General Comment No. 12, the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights declares that the right to food shall "not be interpreted in a narrow or restrictive sense" which equates it to a specific number of calories, but as an obligation that "will have to be realized progressively" (OHCHR 2017). Poppendieck estimates that emergency food aid has become useful to a broad assortment of people and institutions. The USDA, businesses, celebrities, universities, hospitals, churches, courts, profit-making and non-profit organizations all benefit from the halo effect of feeding the hungry (Poppendieck 1998, 24). The hungry themselves are often consigned to a collective inevitability. These individuals, this study's 16 focus group participants and the 46 million others, must grapple with the various nuances of insecurity as they volley between emergency food aid organizations and government-run programs. Utilization of a shared human right would offer them a chance to shout, deafeningly, into the canyon-sized gap between those who make decisions and those who experience their consequences. Until that day, we must reconcile the fact that, within the same county, one person, displeased, may insist upon the disposal of some herb-crusted chicken with 'not enough' buttermilk consommé, while another must visit a hospital to eat.

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