**Green Humanitarianism erodes the Right to Food**

**Food charity is a false solution to hunger relief**

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The methane produced by decomposing food is a significant contributor to anthropogenic causes of climate change. The food waste problem is thus quickly becoming a central feature of debates around climate change mitigation, particularly as the food sector seeks ways to measure and reduce its greenhouse gas footprint. One of the key narratives to address this problem over the past decade has been the transfer of surplus, unsaleable foods to the poor.

Rising social awareness over the dire environmental and economic costs of the food waste problem has led to an expansion of food waste recovery initiatives that center on food charity (e.g. gifts of free food to the poor) particularly in rich but unequal countries of the global north. Such a narrative however significantly erodes the right to food. Food gifts are not justiciable as a right, nor are they often adequate to meet adequate nutritional standards.

Food waste and food insecurity are separate problems demanding separate solutions. The first is a symptom of an industrial food system that profits from overproduction. The second is a manifestation of poverty, one resulting from violence, greed, debt and a lack of state policies that more evenly distribute wealth.

The vast majority of workers engaging in food charity are not paid to recover and distribute food waste to the poor, they do so freely, out of goodwill and compassion toward others. In many ways, food charity acts as a moral safety valve for societies coming to grips with depending levels of inequality. Yet the principal actors donating this food to the poor do receive significant material benefits for their engagement with food charity through tax incentives, direct government payments, as well as marketing and promotion opportunities with the general public. As such large food corporations are incentivized to expand the footprint of the charitable food sector, even though it contributes to further segmenting eaters along lines of disposable income. While at the same time, a new outlet and possible dependency for food waste is being created, without questioning the social and environmental impact that led to situations of waste in first place; specifically leaving the industrial food system unquestioned, and instead waste is further propped up as a necessity for feeding people, rather than addressing declining and worsening social policies and programs in many countries.

Rather than wrestling with the paradox of a food system that simultaneously produces worrisome levels of food surplus and hunger, charity decriminalizes excess by turning our moral gaze toward food poverty rather than on the political process involved in determining whom should have the right to control abundance in society. Charity shifts attention away from structural issues and leads to superficial fixes which are neither dignified, nor long-term solutions to the separate problems of hunger and food waste.

Emergency food networks are critical lifelines supporting many communities in crisis across the world. However, what were initially framed as temporary structures of a temporary crisis, have grown into critical appendages of agrofood supply chains as governments and food companies alike leverage food banking networks to resolve problems of overproduction (food waste) and food insecurity in the industrial food system. These temporary structures have become permanent institutions for underserved communities, while perpetuating a system of food and nutrition inequity for the sake of corporate profit, of which food waste is an essential component.

As governments across the world grapple with the real problems of climate change, it is imperative that they not fall into the trap of conflating food waste reduction with hunger relief. The food waste problem will not be resolved by redirecting industrial food waste to the poor, it is a false narrative that benefits the few at the expense of people and planet.

For further information please also see these articles:

* [www.rightsnotcharity.org](http://www.rightsnotcharity.org)
* <https://link.springer.com/epdf/10.1007/s10460-020-10150-5?sharing_token=wQEiFVXSIK6DXZuhrqL0K_e4RwlQNchNByi7wbcMAY5dQMZa7sqhgFwZnJayvQsWfGiA_zKb3Zi0brVsjZNAzIxRR9aKkbo4yIjjy999GrCyWc_d2iPitMig0AWvYU3Yv53XvA_uw0fQmF1lZ6sbbLKCgPYUEM-Jk8RpqCcuHDYAuJTP7bidHmbzt1NqgT7P>
* <https://theoutline.com/post/8739/food-waste-fight-waste-of-time>
* <https://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/2017/feb/03/supermarkets-food-waste-charities-tesco-sainsburys-fairshare>
* <https://www.resilience.org/stories/2018-04-26/food-waste-not-solution-hunger/>