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**Title**

Recounting food banking: A paradox of counterproductive growth

**Abstract**

The meteoric rise of food bank use in times of prosperity leads us to argue that food banks are institutionalised within New Zealand society with texts reflecting civic, market and domestic discourses. In the current approach to food distribution to those in need, money and resources increasingly go into a food bank system that may increase dependency or co-dependency and do not lead to increased food security for the vulnerable and hungry. Contemplating the changing fortunes of food banks overseas, we suggest the embedding of food banks and other similar food assistance programs must be seriously re-examined. Nowhere have we heard for voices of the vulnerable and hungry calling for more food banks! Yet we recognise that these responses to inequality are at the same time putting food into homes that regularly go without. We posit that the place for food banks in a socially just Aotearoa must be one of *emergency* food assistance only. We advocate for the need to increase incomes through appropriate means – be that through well-paid jobs that match the circumstances of the employee or benefits that assure a life of dignity – not the size and scope of food banks.

## **Recounting food banking: A paradox of counterproductive growth**

Access to health sustaining food is a basic human need. Such access is facilitated or inhibited in a variety of ways the world over. Diverse approaches to ensuring universal access to nutritious food include market-based distribution mechanisms, human rights approaches to policy around food accessibility, and ethical/humanitarian/philanthropic responses to food deprivation. Despite claims to a robustly growing economy and a wealth of opportunities to produce food in abundance, New Zealand is a nation that for several decades has tolerated acute and chronic levels of food deprivation among a significant portion of the population. Among the cited indicators of such deprivation are increase need for and use of food-banks (Carne & Mancini, 2012; Collins, 2011) and other forms of philanthropic food distribution that have emerged since the mid-1990s when the negative implications of New Zealand's commitment to neo-liberal economic policies began to take effect. Easton (1996), Kelsey (1993, 1995), and Hazeldine (1998) began the critique. CPAG (Dale, O'Brien & St John, 2011; St John & Craig, 2004; St John, 2008; St John & Wynd, 2008; Wynd, 2005) and the recent work of Rashbrooke (2013) continues the conversation and challenges the prevailing neoliberal myth about the eventual 'trickle down' effect - that growth in the wealth of the national economy will trickle into the poorer households of the nation.

Public interest in and media attention to matters of access to food security, food programs and food banks has surged in New Zealand in the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Many contemporary food bank operators advise that they are struggling to meet the growing need for emergency food assistance. Newspaper articles from up and down the country report food bank struggles to meet increasing need for food in all regions of this land<sup>1</sup>. These struggles are not unique to New Zealand. They are expressed in many jurisdictions that share a commitment to neo-liberal economic and political agendas while simultaneously attempting to hold fast to democratic values and ideals of social inclusiveness. We think of the UK, Canada, the USA and Australia as examples – each with their own 'foodbank issues'<sup>2</sup>. While we see our concerns emerging in an pattern common to a

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.nzherald.co.nz/hawkes-bay-today/news/article.cfm?c\\_id=1503462&objectid=11271828](http://www.nzherald.co.nz/hawkes-bay-today/news/article.cfm?c_id=1503462&objectid=11271828)  
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<sup>2</sup> The UK: <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2014/feb/20/food-bank-review-undermines-ministers-claim> Downloaded 21/09/14

number of jurisdictions we characterise as liberal democracies similar to our own, our main focus on this paper is the manifestation of this pattern in Aotearoa New Zealand – with our eye on elements common to the global pattern, and elements that may be unique to our land.

### **[Food] poverty in Aotearoa**

Many countries throughout the world have people suffering the effects of hunger and starvation. Issues of food insecurity evident in New Zealand are interlinked with the food issues of other countries. We all participate in the globalised corporatized food system. Decisions made by particular governments however, direct specific domestic production and food import decisions and the nature of food supply and distribution. Our status as an island nation, relatively distant from some markets contributes to some of the unique set of circumstances pertinent. Production costs and international markets affect prices. By any measure, New Zealand is a food-rich country. Food insecurity however, exists for many families in New Zealand. Food insecurity is said to exist where people do not have legitimate physical or economic access to food. A 2014 Quality of Life Survey found one in five new Zealand respondents (20%) said they didn't have enough money to meet their daily needs (such as accommodation, food, clothing and other necessities)<sup>3</sup>. A 2008/09 NZ Adult Nutrition Survey found 7.3% of households had low food security. Participants reported 'relying on others for food or money for food' and 'using special food grants or food banks to acquire the food they needed'<sup>4</sup>. We see a paradox in the provision of food through food banks in a country that has historically proudly proclaimed to be a fine place to raise a family – but where now, more than a quarter (285,000 or 27%) of our children live in poverty<sup>5</sup>.

Statistics about food [in]access[ability] illustrate problems common in modern neo-liberal democracies – access to food is regulated and managed through market systems and structures. There are those among us who are unable to live active healthy lives because of insufficient food or because the foods they eat lack adequate nutrition. We are not now talking about the eating habits of those New Zealanders who can afford and access sufficient

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The US:[ [http://www.dailyprogress.com/news/local-food-bank-under-pressure-as-demand-grows/article\\_ecdc781e-274d-530d-bd06-4500932ad3f5.html?mode=jqm](http://www.dailyprogress.com/news/local-food-bank-under-pressure-as-demand-grows/article_ecdc781e-274d-530d-bd06-4500932ad3f5.html?mode=jqm)  
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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.qualityoflifeproject.govt.nz/media.htm> downloaded 30/10/14

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.health.govt.nz/system/files/documents/publications/a-focus-on-nutrition-ch7.pdf>  
downloaded 31/10/14

<sup>5</sup> Rashbrooke, 2014, Inequality–presentation-web-version-July-lowres  
<http://closetogether.org.nz/toolkit/> downloaded 25/09/14

healthy food but for various reasons do not do so. We are talking about the lives of vulnerable families who, despite the systems of public welfare, charity and increasing corporate benevolence, do not have the options of their more advantaged fellow citizens.

While this paper is not about income poverty, we consider access to food and the ability to access sufficient healthy and nutritious food are inextricably linked to sufficiency of income in Aotearoa. While for many families income insufficiency is a structural outcome, hunger is socially constructed as “an individual or family problem and a matter for charity, rather than a structural or human-rights issue” (Riches, 2012, p. 317). One outcome of this contradiction is a wider public acceptance of systems that include meals in schools and food banks as food providers of last resort.

### **Banking on food-banks to feed the hungry**

In many western democratic countries, emergency food assistance programs were initiated because of increasing levels of deprivation for certain groups within these societies. In the United States for example, emergency food was a response by citizens to a growing aware of the increasing numbers of individuals and families regularly going without food (Winne, 2008). The term food bank is used in the USA to describe a food distribution centre. We follow the definition of CPAG, a leading advocate for children in poverty in New Zealand and refer to a food bank as “a not-for-profit organisation serving people in need and distributing food through local service agencies” (Wynd, 2005, p. 6). In New Zealand, this land of plenty, food banks are becoming entrenched as part of the strategies and methods that vulnerable households use to ensure adequate supplies of healthy nutritious food. That the proportion of people who must rely on charity is rising so much, ought to be of concern to all. It is an indicator that all is not well in this land of milk and money.

The emergence of food banks in New Zealand during the 1980s (Mackay, 1995) was a feature of the neo-liberal changes to the welfare state. Despite improved economic growth in New Zealand in the early years of the twenty-first century, food bank use experienced “meteoric growth” (Wynd, 2005, p. viii) - a “change that occurred in the 1980s-1990s that has not been reversed since” (Rashbrooke, 2014), and is now a seemingly permanent feature of an increasingly unequal New Zealand. Food banks appear to be institutionalised.

### **Questioning the sense of it all**

Winne (2008) considers it paradoxical that energy and resources go into food banks and other charitable food giving programs. This investment ensures that these programs are supported, as would be the wish of their advocates and recipients. The underlying problem of income poverty and food insecurity however, gets no closer to robust transformation in ways that manifest the ideals of western liberal democracies and free-market economies. It is our contention that the time, energy and resources going into systems in which vulnerable people are positioned as ‘recipients’, ‘receivers’ or ‘clients’ of food ‘distributors’ or ‘providers’ should be challenged. A sense of frustration arises from our observation that through encouraging access to food in this way systemic inequality is embedded while at the same time putting food into hungry stomachs where we know it is so badly needed. How can this be explained?

Schüssler Fiorenza’s (2001) draws attention to the dynamics where dominant parties in a society such as influential corporations or lobby groups that are joined-at-the-hip to government funding, protect their position at the top of the kyriarchy as distributors and/or providers of specific foods. Vulnerable children, families, and households remain as recipients of this corporate, government, or charitable benevolence. They appear to have little control over how they might attain sustainable food related autonomy in their lives and to take up their responsibility for the wellbeing of their dependents. We agree with Riches (2012) who says that despite best intentions,

charitable food banking is very much a part of the problem of hunger in rich societies. While it makes a contribution to short-term relief, it is no guarantee of meeting demand, nor of ensuring nutritious or culturally appropriate foods. Its institutionalisation and corporatisation allow the public and politicians to believe that hunger is being solved. It reinforces the notion of hunger as a matter for charity, not politics. If there is to be a strong public commitment to eliminating hunger and reducing poverty in the wealthy states, there is an urgent need for governments to think and act outside this charitable food box (p. 314).

The meteoric rise of food bank use in times of national economic prosperity leads us to argue that food banks are becoming institutionalised within New Zealand society for a segment of the population excluded from the rewards of wealth creation – be that wealth enhanced in part through their labour or as an outcome of systemic efficiency gains achieved by their exclusion. States and markets are necessarily involved in the generation of their poverty and the hunger of their children. Charities are increasingly filling the gap. We argue

food banks and similar initiatives are becoming embedded as part of the strategies that governments use to forego responsibility for vulnerable and food insecure households by insisting that poverty can only be alleviated through job creation. It involves employers in the offering of wages that are not life sustaining. It re-involves the government by insisting on the uptake of jobs, no matter how inadequate the location or the conditions of service. A narrowly defined business model rules all social consideration and increasingly all discourse of social justice. It is the discourse of neo-liberal ideology in full voice.

Riches (2012) points out that food banks have “literally become big business” (p. 317). We are concerned that their growth and legitimacy entrench the pervasive neo-liberal ideology in particular ways. They serve, in part, as a convenient and conscience appeasing avenue that absolves ‘advantaged’ New Zealanders from further systemic responsibility. As per the call to conference our paper is a ‘think piece’ on the counter productive paradox rooted within systems of food banks in Aotearoa. We think things need to change in New Zealand to achieve food security for all. We suggest that increasing the size and scope of food bank systems is not a way forward we would endorse, rather that all activity be considered in the context of long term solutions to solving hunger.

### **A theory of the paradox of counterproductive growth.**

Wary of the complex food bank system that operates in the United States and the acceptance there of food charity as systemically necessary, we consider the ‘case’ made *for* food banks in New Zealand worthy of investigation. Winne (2008) proposes the ‘growth’ in the food bank industry be viewed paradoxically: the increase in efficiency, scale and competitiveness will not reduce the need for the food banks and in the US, for example, the system now seems self-perpetuating. Food for food banks and other food assistance programmes, such as soup kitchens, community gardens, meals for the elderly, and school meal programs comes from well-meaning individuals, private organisations, food producers and corporate food donations; this food can be surplus or wasted food, and also purchased for purpose. Funding also comes from many sources such as individuals, fund raising, donations from private organisations, government and corporations. Food, money, resources and time (volunteer as well as paid) all go into the growing the food bank system. Our discussion that follows explores growing capacity as food banks experience growth, attracting interest and funding from individuals and organisations, and the incentives and assistance that are provided to companies and corporations. We follow Winne in asking – will all this growth eventually reduce the need for food banks?

### **Growing capacity**

In the US, large food banks, originally opened to increase overall food supply, now have the capacity to receive, manage, hold and distribute considerable volumes of food, often solicited from the food industry, efficiently and quickly (Winne, 2008). An example of the size and complexity these goliaths can reach is the non-profit organisation 'Feeding America' (previously 'America's Second Harvest'). As a network of more than 200 regional food bank systems, 'Feeding America' is the nation's largest network of food assistance organisations and the leading domestic hunger-relief charity (Feeding America, 2014). 'Feeding America' serves as a distribution centre and link between the food assistance organisations in its network, facilitating moving food out of one organisation and into another thus helping to control inventory and minimize waste.

'Kiwi Community Assistance' is a New Zealand organisation based on a similar model to that of USA style food banks. The founders of 'Kiwi Community Assistance' originally solicited donations from friends, family and associates. Gaining registered charity status in July 2012, in 2013 they report a 300% increase in food bank/food rescue donations (Kiwi Community Assistance, 2014). In less than two years, the organisation has received IT assistance to build their website, had assistance from more than 32 sponsors and 35 regular volunteers, received financial support and donations from private companies and charitable organisations, and installed a chiller room and increased freezer capacity. Their hope is to see Kiwi Community Assistance continue to grow in 2014. We want to keep increasing the volume of food that we are rescuing and the level of support that we are able to offer those organisation we work with" (ibid).

In considering the need for a centralized food bank system for those in need in Wellington, New Zealand, Brodie (2007) highlights that much energy and effort is going into ideas and programs that, while addressing immediate hunger needs, will not make a sustainable change to the situation of food insecurity for individuals and households.

### **Attracting money and interest**

Grout (2012) studied supermarket donation and waste management processes in New Zealand in order to determine whether a Donations Management System would be appropriate for this part of the food bank system in Aotearoa. Finding the supermarket practices regarding surplus food donations working effectively, thus the food bank sector not in need of a donations management system, Grout identified an opportunity for US-style food coordination, distribution and re-distribution services. Grout notes: "food banks do not need

‘new supply’; they need to better manage their current supply through maximising what they do already” (p. ii). If food banks were not the topic, Grout’s effort, time and resources would likely still be part of some form of research endeavour. But what is the opportunity cost of it being spent as it was – what if the study was on alternatives to food banks rather than doing food banks better?

Food banks receive financial donations as well as food. For example, the US non-profit organisation ‘Feeding America’ has annual budgets in the hundreds of millions of US dollars (Khare, 2011). Food organisations like soup kitchens are often charged handling or shared maintenance fees for any food they receive from a larger food bank distribution centre. Virtually every item of donated food that is moved to be redistributed within food bank systems in the US incurs a cost. The money and cash that goes into food banks systems is not small change. In Aotearoa, a snapshot of 24 food bank organisations (see Appendix 1) shows more than \$842k in the money-go-round in the 2013 financial year. If not food banks, this money would likely still be part of charitable giving. As we ask above, what is the opportunity cost of these funds being spent on operating food banks? What if the donations were spent on long term solutions to hunger rather than operating food banks?

### **Helping those who help the food banks**

In America, food bank organisations have tax advantages available through a highly structured system of tax concessions. During the 1970s, food bank advocates lobbied US legislatures to encourage more donations from companies and succeeded in improving the situation for organisations through the 1976 Tax Reform Act. Under the Act, corporate donors can take advantage of tax deductions for their contributions of surplus food – for 100% of the production costs and also 50% of the difference between the product cost and the normal sale price. The San Antonio Foodbank (2013) gives a simple example on its website:

Selling price \$4.00; Production cost \$1.00; Gross profit: \$3.00

(The maximum deduction can never exceed two times the cost. In this example, maximum deduction is \$2.00 (2 \* \$1.00))

100% of production costs	\$1.00
+ 50% of difference	<u>\$1.00</u>
Total deduction	\$2.00

The tax deductions for donating surplus food equal twice the actual costs of production. Corporations are encouraged to donate unsold food to public charities, such as Feeding



America or one of its networked food banks, or private operating foundations in order to claim the tax deduction for the cost of the unsold food contributions.

Companies in the US were thought to not be contributing to food banks because of the possibility of being sued (Morenoff, 2002). In 1981, US Congress passed the Good Samaritan Act to directly address corporate liability for donated goods. Donors are not subject to civil or criminal liability for the safety of donated food as long as they do not voluntarily and consciously donate while knowing their donations will, or are likely to, be harmful to the health or wellbeing of others. Thus corporate donors to food banks in the US have protection in legislation from the consequences of the food they have donated. Similar legislation protecting donors has been introduced in New Zealand with the Food Act 2014. Within the Act is a ‘good Samaritan’ clause

protecting people who donate food that is safe at the time of donation, and meets any food composition, labelling and other suitability requirements that may apply to the food. These donors will not be able to be prosecuted under the Act should, for example, the food later make people ill.<sup>6</sup>

Each layer adds to the entrenchment of the system of collecting, storing, distributing and redistributing food through food banks. Through this legislative protection, barriers to individuals and corporations donating food are removed.

Working within a market model, based on competitiveness, profitability and efficiency, profit-seeking agents (be they growers, producers, processors, distributors, brokers and/or financiers) opt for foods that attract premium returns (profits). Growing produce with the sole goal of feeding hungry mouths in high need households is unheard of as an aim of business. Corporate interests seek to benefit (financially, through brand association, and/or commercial stability) from government food initiatives. In New Zealand, we evidence this in government supported breakfast in schools programs, such as the ‘KickStart Breakfast’. In this example the government is partially funding a private corporation (Fonterra) and a private corporation that gives its profits for charitable purposes (Sanitarium) to provide products for breakfast for children in need. Because funding is a highly competitive activity itself, and charitable organisations often struggle for funding, Winne (2008) suggests connections to a funder (be they private or government) are usually “zealously defended” (p.184) in order to protect program viability, and organisational existence

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<sup>6</sup> [www.foodsafety.govt.nz/policy-law/food-act-2014/communities.htm](http://www.foodsafety.govt.nz/policy-law/food-act-2014/communities.htm), para 10, Retrieved 20 September 2014.

Charitable assistance and corporate sponsorship cannot be relied upon to provide food relief for households suffering the social wrongs of not having enough food. We consider the departure of a major sponsor from a Red Cross breakfast in school program in 2011 as illustrative. The program, at the time providing food to 59 decile 1 schools, was terminated with the withdrawal of the major sponsor. Other breakfast programs have appeared in many New Zealand schools since the 2013 collaboration between corporate interests, charities and government such as the Fonterra Sanitarium KickStart Breakfast. We are cautious about this “joined-at-the-hip” (Winne, 2008) practice in which government funding for social spending is connected to preferred corporate organisations and where corporate organisations participate in social programs in order to grow new generations of consumers.

### **Making the world a better place**

In a world where a commitment to social responsibility is being proposed by many businesses, assisting with food banks seems like a worthy, even honourable thing to do. In a world filled with inequality, individuals also want to ‘do their bit’ to help the disadvantaged – for these individuals, food bank volunteering or contributing to the system of charitable food is considered a win-win. Riches (2012) contends as well as individual volunteering and corporate social responsibility, food banks offers solutions to surplus and wasted food through recycling, redistribution and rescue. Being efficient with food waste is potentially a greater motivator than the desire to ensure access to sufficient and nutritious food for all. Winne (2008) describes the co-dependency between food banks, food donors, and food bank recipients – “the food bank needs food to give to its clients, and food donors – food manufacturers, restaurants, retailers, individuals, farmers – must dispose of food they can’t use or sell” (p. 70). Food banks become the conduit between the products of donors and the hunger of food bank users. So much industry and effort is going into propping up these systems, yet the situation of increasing numbers of food insecure households seems only to become more severe.

### **Considerations for the future**

Riches (2012) makes the point, and we concur, that in modern neo-liberal democracies “[c]haritable food banking permits the government of rich countries to look the other way, falsely assuming that charitable food relief is an adequate response to food insecurity” (p. 318). The growth in food banks provides so much more to a society as we describe above. But this is the paradox – we question the value of this growth – on ethical and pragmatic

grounds. Vulnerable households in New Zealand, and elsewhere, use exogenous services such as food banks, soup kitchens, food assistance programs, charity food parcels as well as emergency assistance grants and benefits from government and other agencies to secure food. All these initiatives provide necessary but temporary hunger relief that will not mark sustainable changes in household circumstances and embed in the recipients a complex range of emotions, attitudes and identities that do not seem befitting a land of plenty.. But we contend temporary respite cannot be considered a remedy for the poverty and inequality being experienced by these vulnerable households.

International and national academics and activists are calling for an examination of the role of food banks in a sustainable, equitable system in which everyone is free to enjoy universal food security (Brodie, 2007; Riches, 2012; Winne, 2008; Wynd, 2005). Winne (2008) contends political supports, such as the Tax Reform Act and the Good Samaritan Act legislation in the US, contribute to paradoxical counter-productivity within the food bank system. A paradox of counter-productivity holds that certain attempts to solve a social wrong only provide an incentive to make the issue worse. He calls for transformation of the existing food bank systems away from market concepts of expansion and civic responsibility for solicitation for hunger-reaction programs towards programs aimed at universal food security. Current food bank systems and structures work to incentivise the paradox – money and resources increasingly go into a food bank system, yet the system is not one designed to get smaller; growth and expansion of food banks increase dependency or co-dependency, these concepts do not lead to increased food security for the vulnerable and hungry. Originally an emergency food movement, then a domestic hunger relief arrangement, food bank systems in America are now a highly co-ordinated, federally supported, food waste management system (Winne, 2008). Contemplating this change of fortunes for food banks overseas, we suggest the praise for food banks and the embedding of food banks and other similar food assistance programs must be seriously examined. Nowhere have we heard for voices of the vulnerable and hungry calling for more food banks! The unbearable paradox for us, is that growing food banks while embedding systems and responses to inequality are at the same time putting food into houses that in these times regularly go without.

We consider the place for food banks in a socially just Aotearoa is one of *emergency* food assistance, as a necessary and appropriate response to a specific disaster and or unexpected personal circumstances of misfortune or bad luck. The meteoric rise of food bank use in times of prosperity leads us to argue that food banks are institutionalised within New Zealand society with texts reflecting civic, market and domestic discourses. We argue food

banks are becoming embedded as part of the strategies that governments use to forego responsibility for vulnerable and food insecure households. Inadequate income, or income poverty, is affecting the ability of many New Zealand families to achieve food security. We advocate for the need to increase incomes through appropriate means – be that well-paid jobs that match the circumstances of the employee or benefits that assure a life of dignity – not the size and scope of food banks.

## Appendix

		Income	Expenditure
Bay of Islands	2013	24299	17680
CHB Food bank	2013	38369	29055
Far North Community Foodbank Trust	2013	32768	35716
Hamilton Combined Christian Foodbank Trust	2013	136705	91269
Hastings Foodbank Trust	2013	47475	63318
Helensville Emergency Foodbank	2013	14325	14091
Kapiti Community Foodbank Incorporated	2013	27328	31377
Karori Foodbank	2013	16502	18608
Kerikeri/Kaeo Community Foodbank	2013	13267	5287
Levin Interchurch Foodbank	2013	3796	15761
Lower Hutt Community Foodbank Incorporated	2013	62579	44664
Masterton Foodbank Incorporated	2013	38556	26805
Napier Community Foodbank Trust	2013	40178	61575
Nelson Community Foodbank Trust	2013	46806	30833
New Plymouth Community Foodbank Trust 2005	2013	28411	36182
Oamaru Combined Churches Foodbank	2013	18295	11435
Otaki Foodbank Incorporated	2013	45768	43361
Taumaranui Community Christian Foodbank Trust	2013	10104	12160
Tauranga Community Foodbank	2013	120696	104569
The Stratford Community Foodbank Society Inc	2013	12387	12347
The Tokoroa Community Foodbank Trust	2013	9565	12988
Turangi Foodbank Incorporated	2013	18921	36573
Upper Hutt Foodbank Incorporated	2013	31479	34739
Waitara Foodbank - Kai Potaka	2013	9632	8532
		848211	798925

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