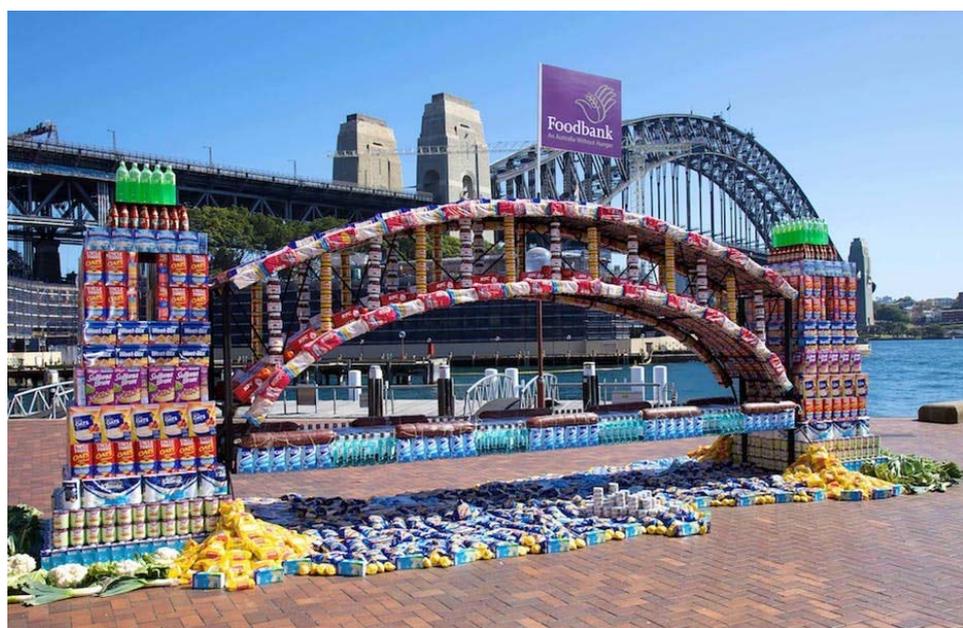


THE CONVERSATION

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The average Australian wastes 200kg of food a year - yet two million of us also go hungry. Why?

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The not-for-profit Foodbank Australia represents one of the largest distributors of food to hungry Australians. But what is the role of government? AAP

Globally, more than 800 million people are chronically undernourished. And some of these people live in Australia.

Of course, these people do not live in desperate refugee camps; and most do not endure long periods of famine and destitution. Yet, last year alone, some two million Australians reported there have been times when they have run out of food and could not afford to buy more.

It may appear contradictory to write about hunger when a large proportion of the Australian population tries to reduce calorie intake. But a more perplexing question is why hunger, although a growing problem in Australia, is neglected in a country which in aggregate terms is food secure.

Recent research indicates that 75% of Australians believe their country is immune to poverty and as such do not think of hunger as a problem. Pressures from high cost of living, whether housing or food prices, lock vulnerable households into the poverty cycle which has changed the face of hunger in Australia, increasingly affecting the aged, single households and the “working poor”. Hunger is an attribute of poverty and deprivation.

The pantry of Australia’s national food relief effort is a low profile outfit called Foodbank, a national operation using a big business model to



channel surplus food from the food and grocery industry onto welfare networks.

Its board members - including prominent Perth executive Peter Mansell - come mostly from high profile private sector executive positions, while its operations resemble a highly efficient distribution network with centres in all major capital cities.

The donors, food producers, manufacturers and retailers, supply Foodbank with excess or surplus food that would have been otherwise disposed off into landfill.

The food is then dispatched from Foodbank distribution centres to welfare agencies on a cost-recovery basis (a nominal service fee), to ultimately reach people in need. On the supply side, donating surplus food not only reduces food companies warehousing costs but eases expenditure associated with dumping food in landfills as well as attracting tax deductibility.

Despite the important expression of community altruism and other frontline welfare agencies, the problem of hunger is far from being solved. In 2011, Foodbank distributed 21 million kilograms of donated food and groceries, making the equivalent of 28 million meals to help 75,000 people a day through a network of 2,500 welfare agencies.

Foodbank relies upon a workforce of 3,500 volunteers to operate its warehouses across the country. From five million kilograms of food donated in 2003 the organisation is now moving more than 20 million kilograms and is hoping to increase its distribution to 50 million kilograms in 2015.

Occasionally, state governments and councils provide grants for specific projects but largely, the organisation survives on donations. Only recently the Australian government has started to contribute \$1 million a year to assist Foodbank in providing vulnerable Australians with what most of us consider as a human right, the right to safe and nutritious food.

This should prompt some hard questions. It is common for liberal market economies to off-load welfare responsibilities from federal and state governments to the voluntary sector and Australia is no exception.

Some view increasing inequality and poverty as the unavoidable flip side of a globalised capitalism and as such the domestic politics of globalisation have increasingly sold the message that governments have limited control. Therefore expectations must be lowered about what is politically possible.

But allowing hunger to be de-politicised in this way fosters the notion that it should fall to non-government organisations to answer pressing social problems, while governments are best at fostering self-reliance and self-provision.



Food waste has dramatic environmental consequences. AAP

The silence of the Australian government around domestic food security not only confirms its denial of the issue, but indicates a failing welfare system.

Also at issue is the environmental consequences of rampant food wastage. It is now reported that about 4.5 million tonnes (200kg per person) of food are wasted every year in Australia. The annual retail value of Australian food waste is estimated at more than \$5 billion.

Among the reasons at the supply end are blemishes or imperfections, over-ordering or short shelf life, while consumers demand perfectly shaped products and plan their pantries poorly.

This wastage has significant ramifications. For instance, dumping a kilogram of beef means wasting the 50,000 litres of water used in its production. Some 47% of municipal waste in landfill is food and green organic waste. Food waste in Australian landfills is the second largest source of methane emission – a gas 25 times more potent than carbon dioxide. If one tonne of food waste generates 3.8 tonnes of CO₂ equivalent emission, then Australian food waste is responsible for 15 million tonnes of CO₂ equivalent emissions every year.



Fighting global hunger is paramount, but we must recognise hunger issues here. AAP

Despite this happening in its own backyard, Australian policy makers still have ambitions to contribute to global food security initiatives.

Australia continues to be a vocal advocate for global food security through its association with international institutions, such as the UN but also the World Bank, IMF or the WTO. For instance, the 2010 budget committed \$464 million over four years to assist countries in Asia, Africa, and in the Pacific region to build community resilience and improve agricultural productivity.

But if Australia refuses to consider hunger as an issue of public policy and continues to consistently undermine adequate financial assistance to its own people, a nagging question remains about the nature of its ambitions for addressing food security beyond its shores.

While fighting global hunger in the developing world is of paramount importance, it is also vital to recognise that hunger in the developed world must be understood as an attribute of primary poverty and a form of relative deprivation. The evidence is unequivocal.

Inadequate welfare benefits are the immediate cause of hunger in Australia. Australia is signatory to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (United Nations, 1996) and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989, 1990), both of which commit ratifying governments to meet the basic needs of their citizens.

How should we understand the Federal Government's proclamation of rights to adequate food, clothing and shelter in international law, while hungry Australians are receiving support from privately run charity organisations?

If the problem of hunger in wealthy and technologically advanced Australia is to be eliminated, it must be recognised as a political question and a fundamental issue of human rights and distributive justice.

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