Boxing up food poverty

Part of the role of any country or state should be to provide a basic level of nutrition to all its citizens. A recent proposal in the United States may make this even more difficult to achieve.

Welfare has been politically contentious for as long as it has been necessary. A construct of the modern industrial state, welfare uses various mechanisms, such as food, services or cash, to provide assistance for hard-pressed citizens qualify under a given standard of poverty. While different societies have divergent approaches and attitudes towards welfare, in the United States and United Kingdom those relying on such 'hand-outs' — to employ a much used pejorative term — have routinely been characterized as unworthy of such benefits, a drain on the state or even undeserving of full citizenship. Recipients of welfare are often used as political scapegoats whilst simultaneously trying to survive and lift themselves and their families out of poverty on what are, in some of the world's richest countries, often very meagre benefits.

Within its proposed budget for the next fiscal year, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), which runs the Supplementary Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) for low-income individuals and families, has suggested a massive change to the way such benefits are distributed. While the term 'food stamps' is still the common vernacular, today's SNAP beneficiaries get an electronic debit card each month that has money loaded onto it, with strict guidelines and restrictions on what it can be used for. SNAP card purchases can only be made at places that choose and are able to accept such cards, which has tended to exclude farmers markets and other cash-only points of sale. This last point has become a growing issue in the effort to help improve health outcomes among the poorest families due to already limited access to fresh fruits, vegetables and breads, which is exacerbated in so-called 'food deserts'. Now the USDA is seeking to make it even harder for them.

Under the new budget, SNAP recipients who receive more than US\$90 a month (which is a vast majority of those in the program) would have half of their monthly benefit replaced instead with a pre-made box of shelf-stable foods, such as cereals, pastas, and canned fruits and vegetables, sent by state governments each month. The department claims that this change

would save money — up to US\$129 billion over 10 years — by reducing 'waste and fraud', and by providing these items to recipients for less than they pay at the store. While such savings would surely be forthcoming due to economies of scale if nothing else, there are numerous issues and questions that, although immediately apparent, are as yet unanswered.

For starters, who determines the contents of the box? Will government officials in consultation with nutritionists carefully select the healthiest possible combination while taking advantage of seasonal changes in prices? Or will the job be outsourced to private companies seeking to make a profit within whatever general guidelines they are given? Will it be the same box of goods for everybody, regardless of age, family size, regional or ethnic cuisine, religious and personal diet choices, and allergic restrictions? Will the contents be the same each month, so that recipients know what to expect? Or change regularly to provide some diversity? What about lost revenues for local grocers, markets and farmers who rely on SNAP recipients as customers on a daily basis? And how can reducing the ability of recipients to buy fresh fruits, vegetables and bread be said to lead to "no loss in food benefits" (<http://go.nature.com/2puS5O3>)?

According to the USDA's own data, some two-thirds of SNAP recipients are under the age of 18 or over the age of 60. Fresh foods are a vital and irreplaceable element of everybody's diet, but all the more so for those who need those nutrients most. Food poverty (the inability of individuals and households to obtain an adequate and nutritious diet) is on the rise in many allegedly 'developed' countries. It is not simply a matter of having enough volume of food to eat but a complex problem also involving lack of access to transport, cooking skills and facilities leading to a paucity of vitamins, minerals and roughage in the diets of those surviving on the lowest incomes. Furthermore, while welfare recipients may be in poverty, that does not mean that they are undeserving of good tasting food, nor should their ability to choose their own food be taken away from them and replaced by bureaucrats trying to shave pennies off a box of goods that may

never be eaten. In trying to save money, the USDA is instead effectively punishing poor people by stripping them of the ability to determine and make meals that meet their own nutritional needs with the means available to them.

It is also worth noting that this move occurs in one of the few nations on earth that has never acknowledged a formal right to food on the part of its residents. Many countries around the world have adopted, either implicitly or explicitly, some form of law or international agreement — such as Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, or the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights — that asserts a right to adequate food as a fundamental component of human life. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations provides voluntary guidelines to nations in line with Millennium and Sustainable Development Goals calling for eradication of mass poverty and hunger in coming decades, with those guidelines premised on Article 25. The Covenant has been incorporated into the legislation of over 70 nations. Countries such as Mexico, Brazil, South Africa and 20 others (mostly in the global south) even have a right to food enshrined as a separate provision within their constitutions.

In this light, a move by the world's richest country to strip away food access through a budget manoeuvre to 'prevent waste' is not only disingenuous but emblematic of an unceasing battle against welfare itself, with farmers, grocers and the poorest among us being punished. It further alienates poor consumers from the source of their food, inevitably furthering the 'plant blindness' that is already too prevalent in our increasingly urbanized society.

No matter how effective plant science is in delivering sustainable agriculture over the coming decade, if the societies in which we live decide they cannot afford to provide the poorest among us with the fresh products of that agriculture, then we will be poor in both spirit and conscience. □

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