

Hunger in the lucky country – charities step in where government fails

Written by Carol Richards, Senior Lecturer, Queensland University of Technology

The non-profit organisation Foodbank released its report [Fighting Hunger in Australia](#) this month.

Like [earlier research](#) it reported that around 15% of Australians experienced food insecurity – an extraordinary figure given up to [40%](#) of edible, but [cosmetically imperfect](#), food is discarded before it reaches the market.

The survey revealed that 3.6 million Australians have experienced food insecurity at least once in the last 12 months. Three in five of those people experience food insecurity at least once a month.

The [UN Food and Agriculture Organisation](#) defines food security as:

a condition where all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary preferences for an active and healthy life.

Despite reasonable [expectations](#) that economic growth in advanced capitalist societies will ensure food security, this is not universal across so-called “wealthy nations”.

Not-so-lucky country for some

The problem lies with [Australia’s neoliberal political economy](#), where [food is a commodity rather than a right](#). Under these conditions, it is the market, rather than government, that determines access to food.

People who are economically marginalised find themselves increasingly distanced from [access to nutritious food](#)

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. With a shortfall in government responses, the non-profit sector has stepped in, patching together a food security safety net.

Read more: [*'Successful failures' – the problem with food banks*](#)

[Our research](#) examined institutional approaches to poverty and food security, considering entitlements to food in economically advanced countries. In nations where people mainly buy their food rather than produce it themselves, purchasing power becomes central to understanding hunger.

Low growth in [wages](#) and [cuts to welfare payments](#) mean hunger touches many, including [Indigenous people, unemployed or under-employed families, and welfare recipients](#)

. Food is one of the few flexible items in a household budget.

Consistent with the observations of Nobel Prize-winning economist [Amartya Sen](#), food insecurity is more a symptom of poverty than a lack of availability of food.

The 'liberal, Anglo-Saxon model' of welfare

In 2016, an Australian Council of Social Service [report](#) estimated that 13% of all Australians live below the poverty line. Of those 3 million people, 730,000 are children. The poverty line is set at 50% of the median disposable income for all Australian households.

It is useful to look at the types of welfare in advanced capitalist nations and how these address poverty and access to food.

Danish sociologist [Esping-Andersen](#) describes Australia's system as a "liberal, Anglo-Saxon model" of welfare. This model is associated with high levels of social stratification. Public

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obligation “kicks in” only when there is abject need, demonstrated through strict means testing.

This [differs](#) from the social-democratic model of welfare capitalism common to Scandinavian countries. There, stratification is lower and an individual has the right to thrive without intervention from family, church or charity.

Our [research](#) shows how social-democratic welfare policies lift the standard of living for all. This means citizens of countries such as Norway have rarely required charitable food relief despite high food prices.

In Australia, the federal welfare agency, Centrelink, offers limited relief for the food insecure, such as one-off crisis payments to recipients of benefits. However, increases in the cost of food, energy and housing prices have not been matched by corresponding increases in [welfare payments](#).

Read more: [Powerful supermarkets push the cost of food waste onto suppliers, charities](#)

Further, there is no other Australian government policy that deals with domestic food security, despite the nation’s increasing reliance on food charities.

The Australian welfare state does not explicitly guarantee freedom from hunger. Instead food relief is dependent on [business donations](#) distributed through the non-profit sector.

What can be done to alleviate hunger?

To alleviate hunger, poverty also needs to be alleviated.

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There is no quick fix to this, but in the first instance the government needs to take responsibility for poverty and food security as a matter of urgency. No one could argue it is acceptable to have [730,000 children](#) living below the poverty line.

Earlier government deliberations on [food security](#) focused on agricultural production and export to enhance global food security. These have tended to look outward rather than inward.

The abandoned [National Food Plan](#) was to be the Government's first food policy designed provide an integrated approach to Australia's food system. However, this was orientated to a corporate-led food system that overlooked the needs of civil society.

Australia's welfare system relies heavily on [charity and markets](#), rather than the state, to respond to the needs of economically marginalised people. This is evident in the collaborations between food banks and supermarkets to redirect food waste to disadvantaged people.

Although responding to immediate need, [food relief does not prevent food insecurity](#). There is potential to alleviate poverty and prevent food insecurity through Australia's current welfare model. Unlike the situation for domestic food security policy, income support architecture is already in place.

However, support urgently needs to come into line with the cost of living if we are to recognise food as a right and eliminate first world hunger.

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the Australian Food Sovereignty Alliance and the Right to Food Coalition.

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