



# Action research on organizational change with the Food Bank of the Southern Tier: a regional food bank's efforts to move beyond charity

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## Abstract

This paper reports on an action research project about organizational change by a regional food bank in New York State's southern tier. While the project team initially included a sociologist, food bank leadership and staff, it expanded to involve participants in food access programs and area college students. This paper combines findings from qualitative research about the food bank with findings generated through a collaborative inquiry about a ten-year process of organizational change. We ask how a regional food bank can change its approach to address root causes of hunger. Acknowledging that narrow, pragmatic definitions of hunger promote charitable responses, our collaboration is grounded in structural understandings of poverty that refuse to blame the poor or treat poverty as an accident. Decades-long economic restructuring, deindustrialization and a rise in the service economy have resulted in growing inequality and long-term demand for "emergency" food in New York State. We outline critiques by scholars and practitioners of the emergency food regime. Description and analysis of the organizational change efforts of the Food Bank of the Southern Tier combine discourse analysis, collaborative inquiry, interviews, and participant observation. Discourse analysis of the agency's strategic plans documents changes in aspirations, exposure to new epistemic communities and repertoires of actions. Interviews with participants evidence impacts of the organization's advocacy and education programs on people with lived experience in poverty. Through a participatory process, we developed a collaborative chronology of phases of organizational change. Collaborative analysis of organizational changes demonstrates new definitions of the problem, a shift in service focus, changing outcomes and increased funding for advocacy. While recognizing substantial constraints, this project contributes to evidence that food banks may shift their discourse and practices beyond charity.

**Keywords** Food banks · Food justice · Hunger · Organizational change · Action research · Food regime · Emergency food · Dispossession

## Abbreviations

AR	Action research
FBST	Food bank of the Southern Tier
SB	Speaker's Bureau, a project of the food bank of the Southern Tier

## Introduction

The emergency food system, which includes food banks, food pantries, meal programs, food rescue programs, and anti-hunger organizations, concerns critics because it addresses the problem of hunger with charity rather than rights (Poppendieck 2014). Despite ongoing economic crises, budget cuts, stagnating wages, decline in union rates, and the rise of service jobs, analysts are concerned that anti-hunger organizations mainly offer charity food and public benefit programs rather than addressing poverty, which is the root cause of hunger and food insecurity (Fisher 2017).

At the same time, food banks are at the front lines of meeting material needs for a wide population of those in poverty. Given their reach, they may have unique potential for building a movement to end poverty led by the poor. In

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view of this potential, we offer a case study of the efforts of a regional food bank to move beyond a charity model. Acknowledging the contradictions of food banks, I used Action Research (AR) principles to engage a core team<sup>1</sup> of food bank leadership and staff in a collaborative inquiry.

This paper begins by reviewing theories of hunger and poverty. Social movements committed to ending poverty and hunger advance a theory of poverty as structural (Baptist and Rehmann 2011), which provides a challenge to food-banking-as-usual. We contrast theories that blame no one or blame people for their own poverty and hunger with structural theories that recognize that poverty and hunger are the product of damaged social systems. Evidence of contemporary political-economic decline in the United States and New York State provides context for our inquiry and reveals that the Empire State is a leader in inequality. Literature from scholars and practitioners on the emergency food regime highlights the contradictory roles of food banks as well as their potential.

This paper combines qualitative interviews with analysis of organizational data gathered through collaborative inquiry. Our inquiry documents and analyzes efforts by the Food Bank of the Southern Tier (FBST) to make changes in the organization's structure, staffing, budgeting, strategic plan and outcome measures.<sup>2</sup>

A collaborative analysis of organizational changes used categories adapted from Fisher (2017) and demonstrated changes in problem definition, who it serves and outcomes measured; increased funding for advocacy; and impacts of its advocacy and education on program participants. Interviews with participants of the food bank's leadership program for people with lived experience in poverty illustrate that FBST's advocacy and education program contributed to their self-concept, encouraged their leadership, and contributed to structural understandings of poverty. Finally, I examine possibilities and challenges for FBST and suggest future lines of research and action for transforming the roles of food banks.

<sup>1</sup> The core team includes the author, FBST President and CEO Natasha Thompson (subsequently referred to as the president), and staff, Randi Quackenbush and Lyndsey Lyman. They all contributed as described below, including by reviewing data and conclusions, making edits and comments. All errors, however, are mine.

<sup>2</sup> This report draws from various projects with human participants, each of which received individual IRB approval under the following IRB numbers: 1215-06, 0217-16, and 0516-03. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. Additional informed consent was obtained from all individual participants for whom identifying information is included in this article.

## Literature review

### Theories and definitions of hunger and poverty

Despite widespread agreement that hunger is deplorable, contemporary understandings of this social problem focus on narrow and pragmatic definitions (Fisher 2017). The USDA (2013) defines food insecurity as the "limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways." As Fisher (2017) and Poppendieck (1999) argue, popular definitions of hunger as lack of access to food promote voluntary, charitable responses like food drives and soup kitchens, rather than social changes that address the root causes of hunger.

Similarly, official poverty measures<sup>3</sup> define who is experiencing poverty but do not identify causes of poverty. Taken at face value and without relational understandings, such measures are used to imply that individuals can "get out of poverty," reinforcing common cultural assumptions that suggest the poor should pull themselves up by their bootstraps. Popular and predominant explanations for poverty blame the behavior of the poor or treat poverty as a temporary accident (Goldsmith and Blakely 2010). Such assertions frequently reinforce racist or classist assumptions. Cultural references reinforce these theories, such as the common phrase that someone is "down on their luck" or the caricature of the Welfare Queen, a black single mother who gets rich from her welfare checks (Zucchini 1997).

In contrast, sociological and historical analysis suggest that poverty, and therefore hunger, occurs as a result of structures built into the economy and society (Goldsmith and Blakely 2010; Baptist and Rehmann 2011). Under capitalism, poverty is a necessary byproduct of capital accumulation; the creation of wealth for a few requires the impoverishment of many. In *Capital Volume 1*, Marx defines primitive accumulation as the process of evictions, colonialism and theft that allowed the emerging capitalist class to accumulate wealth by stealing the land and the labor of others (1867). For Harvey (2003) accumulation by dispossession emphasizes the ongoing nature of dispossession, via privatization of public land and public services, financialization and manipulation of food prices, and structural adjustment. A structural approach argues that poverty is a product of historical, social relations, that policies contribute and

<sup>3</sup> The official poverty measure is three times the inflation-adjusted cost of a minimum food diet, based on average family expenses in 1963 (U.S. Census Bureau 2017). The supplemental poverty measure (SPM) includes cash resources and noncash benefits from government programs (U.S. Census Bureau 2017). The Census also calculates deep poverty (Shaefer et al. 2012).

exacerbate it, and that dynamics inherent in the economic system impoverish and dispossess people. Further, structural explanations clarify that individuals who are poor are not to blame for their own poverty. For this reason, poor people's organizations teach structural theories of poverty as part of consciousness raising (Baptist and Rehmann 2011). They suggest that poverty is not individual, but an ill of the whole society.

As this AR project developed, I introduced structural explanations for poverty and hunger to FBST leaders and staff and in workshops as part of a leadership training for participants in food access programs, as described below. Our research teams, including college students and food access program participants, used a structural framework (Goldsmith and Blakely 2010; Baptist and Rehmann 2011) for the analysis that follows.

### **Economic crisis, growing inequality, and poverty: impacts in New York State**

Economic restructuring, growing inequality and poverty have their origins in long-term crises in agriculture and manufacturing. The "emergency food system" emerged in the 1980s with recession, economic collapses in industrial cities, and Reagan-era cuts in government entitlement programs (Fisher 2017; Poppendieck 1999). Economic restructuring and austerity policies shrank middle-income strata and swelled the ranks of the poor, exacerbating inequalities that have made the "emergency" a long-term, structural reality.

Economic restructuring occurred as wages and productivity in the United States decoupled in the 1970s; real wages largely stagnated while productivity continued to rise (Mishel 2012). Corporate leaders attempted to resolve periodic crises of overproduction via wage cuts, deunionization, subcontracting, flexibilization and the increasing use of immigrant and women's labor (Robinson 2008).

A significant contribution in New York's Southern Tier during this time period was made by Janet Fitchen (1981, 1991). A "social scientist-activist," she referred to the region as the northern tip of Appalachia and defined rural New York State based on its land use in agriculture, forests and underdeveloped countryside, and by social identity or state of mind. Her work contributed an understanding of social consequences of farm crisis and manufacturing job loss on rural poor people. In 1985–1990, as she conducted fieldwork, she warned about the impact of cuts in federal services on rural culture. She argued that loss of a manufacturing plant in a small community "packs a much stronger wallop" (p. 71) than the same closure in an urban area.

One dimension of economic restructuring was deindustrialization, a widespread trend of disinvestment in productive capacity (Bluestone and Harrison 1982). Another was the rise in service-sector jobs. Two major episodes of

manufacturing job loss in the U.S. occurred, in the 1980s and 2000s (Atkins et al. 2011). From 2000 to 2014, the U.S. lost over 5 million manufacturing jobs (Scott 2015). New York State, by 2000, lost over 60% of its manufacturing jobs since its peak in the mid-1940s (DiNapoli 2010). From 2000 to 2008, upstate New York's manufacturing sector lost 105,000 jobs, declining by 20% from 2000 to 2004, and then by 8% from 2005 to 2008 (DiNapoli 2010). In 2008 and 2009, New York was hit by the Great Recession and lost more than 300,000 jobs (DiNapoli 2013). After the recession, from 2007 to 2012, the only economic sectors that grew were service sectors, with the most growth in leisure and hospitality and education and health (DiNapoli 2013). Yet these new jobs did not provide the wages manufacturing jobs once did.<sup>4</sup>

Although New York State's 2016 gross state product was nearly \$1.49 trillion (U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis 2017), enough to put it among the highest ranking 13 countries in the world, it is the most unequal state in terms of wealth distribution. Since 1979, the average incomes of the top 1% have grown by 272% in inflation-adjusted terms in New York, while the average incomes of the bottom 99% rose a meager 5.4% (Sommeiller et al. 2016). According to the Economic Policy Institute, New York State has the highest rate of income inequality in the country (Sommeiller et al. 2016).

In 2016, the official poverty rate in New York State was 15.7%. The United Way's ALICE (Asset Limited Income Constrained Employed) Threshold depicts the gap between the poverty line and regional costs of housing, childcare, food, transportation, health care and taxes.

In New York State, there are 2.1 million ALICE households, while another 1.1 million households live below the poverty level. In total, 44% of the state's households earn below the ALICE Threshold, meaning that they cannot afford housing, childcare, food, transportation, healthcare and taxes (United Way 2016).

The reduction in steady, well-paying jobs has spurred reliance on food distribution systems once thought to be temporary and for "emergencies" only. Federal emergency food assistance programs, which were born around the time of the Great Depression, have been supplemented by privately funded food banks, food pantries and soup kitchens (Poppendieck 1999). More and more individuals and families rely on food assistance programs. Feeding America, a U.S. network of 200 member food banks, reported distributing 4 billion meals in 2016, nearly tripling its annual food distribution since 2008 (Feeding America 2008, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> From 2009 to 2014, wage growth in leisure and hospitality was moderately above the inflation rate education and health was only moderately above (DiNapoli 2015).

In a 2012 study of emergency food programs in New York State, more than 80% of programs reported an increase in the number of clients over the prior year. Half reported an increase in the number of working people and seniors, and 75% reported an increase in children (St. Clair and Dunlea 2012). In their six-county service area, according to Feeding America data, FBST provided more than 8.3 million meals, but the estimated demand was for 5 million more (Gundersen et al. 2016). Food insecurity is a regular concern of 12.5% of New Yorkers and 13% of people nationally (Coleman-Jensen 2017).

### The emergency food regime: critiques and contradictions

Scholars McMichael and Friedmann defined food regimes as constellations of class relations, geographical specialization and inter-state power that connect international relations of food production and consumption with periods of capitalist accumulation (Friedmann 1993; Friedmann and McMichael 1989, p. 95; Friedmann 2009, p. 335). Food regimes include actors such as states, corporations, scientists, social movements, consumers and others. They adopted the term regime from Gramsci (1971) to emphasize that these are configurations of social forces that achieve temporary relative stability. Today, according to McMichael (2005, 2009), the industrial food regime is giving rise to a corporate regime based on corporate control and financialization. The framework of food regimes invites investigation of what might shift the social constellations of the contemporary food regime. Here we focus on the *emergency* food regime, with an appreciation that these social relations may be temporary.

Criticism of the charity model in food banks is well established. Poppendieck's (1999) *Sweet charity? Emergency food and the end of entitlement*, defined the field. She outlines the seven deadly "ins" of food banks (a play on words referring to the Catholic concept of seven deadly sins). Emergency food institutions, according to her research, offer food that is (1) insufficient in quantity, (2) inappropriate or mismatched with consumer choices, (3) nutritionally inadequate. Their providers struggle with (4) instability, (5) inaccessibility, (6) inefficiency, and (7) reproduce indignity. Most of all, emergency food programs become part of a vicious cycle. They were created to compensate for the limitations of public entitlements, but actually further undermine them by providing a "moral safety valve" to the public (Poppendieck 1999, p. 301). For example, in eliciting donations, food banks often argue in favor of their efficiency over that of public programs. The very act of offering food distribution as an "anti-hunger action" precludes approaches that better address the root causes of hunger and poverty.

McIntyre et al. (2016) analyzed publications that built on and extended Poppendieck's seven deadly [s]ins. Their

analysis contributes two constructs to distinguish between contemporary critiques of food banks: operational challenges and perpetuating inequalities. They also show how the literature has extended Poppendieck's critique with these five general arguments: (1) Food banks are ineffective in addressing individual and household food insecurity. (2) They create or reproduce inequality among donors, volunteers and recipients. (3) They promote institutionalization of food provision via bureaucratic procedures. (4) They invalidate entitlements. (5) They make hunger invisible by creating the impression that the problem has been resolved.

Most challenging for food banks is the critique that they perpetuate inequalities. According to such critics, a narrow focus on hunger as a social problem promotes pragmatism rather than actions to address root causes. The proliferation of charity relieves pressure and legitimates personal actions as a response to economic dislocation (Poppendieck 1999). Further, Fisher (2017) argues that the narrow, pragmatic definition of hunger as the lack of access to adequate food ignores the relationship between hunger and poverty and "acts as a barrier to its own elimination" (p. 20). Poppendieck (1999) argues that a number of interest groups benefit from the emergency food system, including the U.S. Department of Agriculture, businesses, churches, environmentalists, as well as groups, organizations and institutions that benefit "from the halo effect of 'feeding the hungry.' If we didn't have hunger, we'd have to invent it." (Poppendieck 1999, p. 293). Hunger alleviation allows people to satisfy religious and cultural obligations and offers a simple way to alleviate guilt and prevent food waste without confronting larger systems of inequality.

Fisher (2017) critiques the alignment of anti-hunger organizations with large corporations in an "unholy alliance" he calls the anti-hunger industrial complex. Food banks channel charitable donations via food pantries to distribute donated food as well as surpluses purchased from food processors and retail chains. Because corporations receive tax write-offs in exchange for surplus foods and anti-hunger donations, food banks provide positive public relations for corporations. By "subsidizing mainly processed, boxed, and canned commodity producers for their mistakes (mainly over-supply or mislabeled goods), the emergency food system benefits big industry and the poverty-industrial complex of nonprofits" (Vitiello et al. 2015, p. 420). The board of directors of Feeding America, a national network of food banks, includes representatives from major food, agriculture and finance industries, including Morgan Stanley, Walmart, The Kroger Company, and ConAgra Foods (Feeding America 2017). With leaders and funders beholden to corporations, anti-hunger organizations find they must avoid rocking the boat, so they are further constrained in addressing root causes of hunger. Winne (2008) finds that generally food banks do not lead critical public discussion

around hunger and poverty “because influential people don’t attain exalted positions within a community’s hierarchy by asking hard, controversial questions or becoming agitators” (p. 76). As well, he finds that boards and officers of national food banks usually include CEOs or high-ranking officers of major corporations. “Rarely do you find a person of color or someone who has received assistance from a food bank among them” (Winne 2008, p. 76).

Despite the depth of their critiques, Poppendieck (1999), (2014), Winne (2008) and Fisher (2017) envision roles for emergency food providers in transforming the emergency food regime. Poppendieck (1999) calls for food banks to participate in a movement. They should not focus uniquely on hunger, she explains, but rather on poverty. He asks what might happen if food banks “put all the effort soliciting and distributing wasted food into ending hunger and poverty?” (p. 77).

Recent research examines food bank efforts to get closer to the roots of hunger. Galinson (2018) examines two case studies of California food banks that added advocacy programs, suggesting that such programs can reduce hunger and address its root causes in poverty. She argues, that rather than working themselves out of a job, as they aspire to, “they’ve worked themselves into a new and necessary job: pushing food accountability back on the government, and in the most progressive cases, using advocacy to enrich their communities by ensuring those affected have a voice in creating solutions” (p. 97). Two interconnected action research projects by Dodd and Nelson (2018) work with service providers and service users to shift discourse and practice about emergency food provision. Our collaborative inquiry aims to contribute to such studies of food bank potential by engaging leaders and staff of a regional food bank in examining organizational change.

## Methods: action research for organizational change

Action Research (AR)<sup>5</sup> is a practice that combines research, action and education to addresses real-life problems in a holistic manner (Greenwood and Levin 2007, p. 63). It involves participants, or co-investigators, with diverse experiences and capacities in seeking solutions to problems which are tested in practice (Greenwood and Levin 2007, p. 111). A core commitment of AR is to generate social change to ease oppressive conditions with participation by those

directly affected. Ideally, participants are involved in all phases of knowledge production, from problem identification, research design and methods, dialogue, data gathering and analysis, and utilization (Park 1993). Embedded within broader social change processes, AR can support people facing oppression to develop critical consciousness, identify obstacles to change, and challenge oppressive structures (Greenwood and Levin 2007).

In North America,<sup>6</sup> AR related to poverty and hunger has been used to identify issues that affect participants and generate social action or policy change. While techniques and technologies differ, AR combines knowledge from researchers and participants and encourage individuals to participate in efforts toward raising awareness about the issues facing them (Collins 2005; Wang 1999; Valera et al. 2009; Knowles et al. 2015). Their projects frequently involve connections between communities and universities (Valera et al. 2009; Collins 2005), and some, like ours, build multi-year community-university partnerships (Dodd and Nelson 2018).

The tradition of using AR to facilitate organizational change draws on social psychologist’s Kurt Lewin’s efforts to involve workers in improving their conditions via interventions to undo old structures, change structures, and replace structures (Greenwood and Levin 2007). McNiff and Whitehead (2000) suggest that organizations can be learning organizations by developing “generative transformational theories”, which includes “studying their own changing work and telling the stories of their learning processes as they tried to make a difference” (p. 57).

This project describes organizational change by a food bank, focusing on food bank practices. We ask, as McNiff and Whitehead (2000) suggest, how a food bank can understand and develop its work. We combine knowledge from a researcher, food bank staff and participants with lived experience of poverty to investigate the organizational changes made by a food bank. Similar to Dodd and Nelson (2018), we examine changing discourse and practices and work with both service users and service providers.

In 2011, I met the president of the Food Bank of the Southern Tier. Prompted initially by our shared commitment to the goal of ending poverty, we began discussions about a possible collaboration. As we reflected on an initial service-learning project and a visit with the Poverty Initiative, a non-profit organization focused on building a social movement to end poverty, we agreed to use an Action Research approach toward a shared goal of moving FBST beyond a charity model. Over the last 7 years, we have built and expanded the collaboration through civic engagement and service-learning projects with college, faculty and student

<sup>5</sup> Action Research, Participatory Research, Participatory Action Research, and Community-Based Research are a cluster of practices that all share common principles. They cross disciplines and address a range of problems, but all combine education, research and action (Hall 1979b in Park et al. 1993).

<sup>6</sup> Many methods to address on poverty and hunger were developed in international development contexts.

involvement in FBST initiatives, as well as participation by the agency in the national movement to end poverty.

Our efforts have gradually involved more stakeholders. The FBST president invited staff from the FBST to participate, as well as hiring new staff for key positions, and supported development of the Speaker's Bureau, an education and advocacy program to support and develop the leadership of food pantry users and people with lived experience in poverty. As well, I developed two sociology classes which participated in the inquiry.<sup>7</sup> Today, the collaboration involves the food bank president, three staff members, ten members of the Speaker's Bureau, and myself, a sociology professor. Forty-eight college students have been involved (four classes of twelve students each).

AR processes often involve iterative cycles of inquiry, action and reflection. In the best cases, they can be considered a spiral, with iterative inquiry that builds knowledge through the process (Greenwood and Levin 2007, p. 112). Our process has developed through a series of collaborative inquiries (Kelly et al. 2001), with each phase of inquiry involving new theories, knowledge, action, and reflection, building upon prior phases. Each phase of the inquiry has focused on specific goals. An initial goal was to develop a hunger education curriculum for FBST. Next, we worked together to learn more about the experiences of people who use FBST's pantries. Later, we have worked to build involvement by people with lived experience in poverty and those most affected by hunger. By the second phase, we knew our project required a clearer understanding of root causes of hunger and poverty. By 2015, it was clear that our collaboration would involve collaborative institutional analysis to analyze changes in the food bank's practices and to advance such changes.

Action Researchers propose that those affected by research should participate in the process of the research. Existing typologies of participation (Arnstein 1969; Pretty 1995; White 1996) carry implicit normative assumptions that suggest a progression from superficial or manipulative to "genuine" forms (Cornwall 2008). As Cornwall argues, participation shapes and is and shaped by power relations, and that meanings of participation include both intentions and actions of those who initiate participation as well as interests and actions of those who participate. Therefore, rather than aiming for "full participation" or assuming deep and wide participation, we follow Cornwall's suggestion to aim for "optimal participation", which means finding an appropriate balance between between depth and inclusion for the purpose and context.

<sup>7</sup> These were senior seminars in sociology at Ithaca College. I taught Community Organizing in 2012 and 2015, and Inquiry and Action for Social Change in the spring semesters of 2016 to 2018.

This paper combines data gathered through qualitative sociological methods as well as through collaborative inquiry. With the guidance of the core team, I collected organizational documents, including job descriptions, strategic plans, newsletters, grant proposals, and other organizational texts. With consent, I kept personal communications and meeting notes from meetings with the core action research team. A graduate research assistant and I conducted interviews with six participants from the Speakers Bureau and attended the SB public graduation ceremony. Students in 2016 and 2017 conducted participant observation at eight pantries and interviewed ten pantry volunteers and coordinators. To document the inquiry and organizational learning, the core team developed a chronological chart. Our collective analysis of this data used theories of poverty and Fisher's (2017) categories about food bank changes to assess the FBST's changes.<sup>8</sup> As well, my graduate assistant and I used narrative analysis (Esterberg 2002), guided by feminist interview strategies (Devault 1990) to analyze interview transcripts and notes, identifying common themes, concepts, structures, identities, conflicts and meanings of their stories, which we then checked with the core team.

In this collaboration, I have aspired to serve as "friendly outsider", combining critique and support, showing opportunities for change, and making evident tacit knowledge (Greenwood and Levin 2007, p. 125). With FBST, I have served as collaborator, volunteer consultant, outside critic, and academic partner for service-learning.<sup>9</sup> My role has always been informal, uncompensated, and evolving. I have shared theoretical models that see the root causes of hunger as structural poverty and have encouraged FBST to learn from organizations that demonstrate a structural analysis, including a national network of poor people's organizations. Five of my sociology courses have engaged in service-learning projects with FBST, in which students conducted research about food pantry volunteers' attitudes and behaviors and developed sociological evidence regarding issues

<sup>8</sup> While conventional social research seeks objectivity, action researchers follow the hermeneutical position that reality is subjective and social science aims to interpret reality (Greenwood and Levin 2007 p. 68). There is no set of methodological rules that can substitute for testing knowledge generated in practice. Therefore, our process was an interpretive one, aiming to achieve credibility and workability (Greenwood and Levin 2007, p. 81).

<sup>9</sup> In Summer 2012, I collaborated with FBST's curriculum committee to design their Hunger Education curriculum. I consulted with FBST staff to plan community focus groups with clients in Summer 2015, consulted to develop the Speaker's Bureau training curriculum (from 2016 to present) and to design a management team training on root causes of poverty (Spring 2018). I conducted workshops on root causes, realities and theories of poverty for FBST staff and for SB trainings in Spring 2016 and 2017.

selected from pantry users' stories.<sup>10</sup> Through this collaboration, I have learned a great deal from FBST leaders, staff and participants.

## Findings

### Discursive change in FBST's strategic plans

One way to assess change is to examine the organization's explicit discourse, or language used to describe its work, mission and goals. Four strategic plans were available, for 2005, 2007, 2010–2012, and 2017.<sup>11</sup> Based on categories for analysis that we discussed and agreed upon in our collaborative inquiry, I analyzed the discourse of these plans to assess the organization's projected role and theory of change, the organization's proposed goals, and outcomes or measures of success. I then reviewed my observations with the core team.

In the early plans, despite its non-profit status FBST projects itself as a business focused on food-distribution. The 2005 plan included categories adopted from the business sector including Warehouse Operations, Business and Support Services, and Development and Public Relations, in addition to the social service category of Agency and Program Services. The 2007 plan projected a new focus on "nutritional quality as much as on pounds distributed", while continuing to emphasize "fundamental business practices, technology and information management, corporate governance and risk management."

The 2010–2012 plan was titled a "business plan." Its language continues to reflect a business model, including terms such as "facilities transition" "financial growth," "brand awareness," "sourcing-distribution pipeline," and "operational excellence." Their mission as "the leading anti-hunger organization in the region," begins with the aspiration that "no one should go hungry." Within the context of language of business excellence, this hardly raises an eyebrow, but should be read as a commitment to distribute food effectively.

<sup>10</sup> In 2012 and 2015, Community Organizing classes (senior sociology seminars) developed and piloted hunger education workshops for high school students, educating students and themselves on the realities of poverty and hunger. Later, I developed a 400-level Action Research class called Inquiry and Action for Social Change. In Spring 2016 and 2017, students in this class interviewed volunteers about their perceptions about clients; observed social interactions and conducted preliminary political-economic research. In Spring 2018, students developed sociological briefing papers for the FBST and SB graduates to provide sociological data about issues selected from SB graduates' personal stories.

<sup>11</sup> Strategic plans from 2005, 2007, 2010–2012 and 2017 were provided by the current FBST president. The first two were implemented under the prior president.

The 2017 plan, however, includes different language, reflecting a new ethic as well as FBST's involvement in a new epistemic community, or a new network of knowledge-based experts (Haas 1992). The plan is organized around three axes, Feed, Lead, and Strengthen, each focused on an aspiration, and anchored in the "two feet" of Catholic social teaching: justice and charity (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops 2018). "FEED" aspires to "address the problem of hunger today" by providing "quality, nutritious food to those in need." The second axis, "LEAD," strives to "Mobilize a movement around the issue of hunger", through education, advocacy, convening and collaboration. In particular, the education goal proposes to "develop a Common Message Framework that includes local stories, data and research" and "increase general awareness about the root causes of hunger and debunk stereotypes." The third axis is to strengthen internal capacity (i.e., staff competencies) and build capacity of member agencies to carry out the first two strategic goals, through technical support, training, incentives and funding for agencies willing to improve or expand services. The first axis maintains the language and commitment to efficient business practices. The third refers to "training" and "services", terms which are broad enough to bridge business and non-profit or social service ethics. However, the second axis adopts terms used by social movements including "mobilize", "movement", "advocacy", and "awareness." This second access demonstrates FBST's engagement with a new epistemic community, beyond anti-hunger organizations.

In combination with our participatory data, below, the language in FBST's strategic plans reveals that the organization is engaged in a new epistemic community, including a network of social movement organizations committed to ending poverty. Its 2017 strategic plan describes new analysis regarding the problem of hunger. It acknowledges that the "root causes" of hunger are in poverty and inequality and that addressing these requires a "movement." The plan also expresses a desire to add a new repertoire<sup>12</sup> of actions which we call a justice food bank repertoire, including educational workshops, advocacy, and mobilizing. While FBST's strategic plans demonstrate a changing vision and aspiration, their impacts must be assessed in practice. Additional data allows us to consider the practical implementation of this vision.

<sup>12</sup> Social movement scholar Charles Tilly (2002) defines repertoires of contention as a set of performances by which any pair of politically constituted actors make claims on each other, which if realized, would affect their object's interests.

## Advocacy, education and its impacts on participants

From 2005 to 2015, the organization more than doubled its annual revenue, from \$6 million to \$14 million. It increased the in-kind value of food donated to the agency and secured greater fundraising revenue. In turn, it tripled its staff, adding warehousing positions to support its increased food distribution, and fundraising and programmatic positions to support pursuit of the advocacy and educational goals and client-focused community organizing model outlined in the most recent strategic plan. The President and Chief Operating Officer explain that this financial growth is a factor that has enabled the FBST to broaden its social justice mission. However, Fisher (2017) warns that the growth mindset keeps food banks beholden to corporate donors.

Like many food banks, FBST documents increasing budget for advocacy and education, from \$65,632 in 2012 to \$221,789 in 2017. In other food banks, advocacy programs are often housed in “external affairs” offices, along with fundraising and external communications, but FBST’s president decided that advocacy is not about making the organization look good. In 2015, FBST established a separate advocacy and education department which as grown to four full-time employees (personal communication, Chief Operating Officer, FBST 2018).

Fisher (2017) recommends that Food Banks increase their advocacy on public policy to at least 10% of organizational budgets by 2022 (p. 75). He proposes that advocacy should focus not only on charitable safety-net programs but on policies to address income inequality and poverty, including minimum wage, affordable housing, health care, labor relations, fair tax and job creation. In this spirit, the FBST has gotten involved with networks of organizations that focus on the root causes of poverty and hunger. As well, an initiative of its advocacy and education department, the Speaker’s Bureau, aims to build leadership among people with lived experience in poverty.

Preliminary impacts of FBST’s changes are evidenced in interviews with program participants. A graduate research assistant and I conducted interviews with six Speaker’s Bureau participants and six other clients in June and July 2016, and I also attended the public Speaker’s Bureau Graduation in May 2017 where they delivered public testimonies. With narrative analysis (Esterberg 2002) and feminist interview strategies (Devault 1990), we identified common themes including the impact of the Speaker’s Bureau on participants’ self-esteem and sense of purpose, theories of poverty, and motivation for leadership.

The opportunity to interact with others in similar situations and experience their own leadership helped to build their self-esteem, develop a sense of purpose, and challenge internalized oppression. For several who were domestic violence survivors, the most significant impact was “Realizing

that we are not all alone. We don’t have to be ashamed, and we don’t have to stay behind closed doors.” One participant exclaimed, “Thank you for giving me a purposeful life again. I am filled with hope and plan to spread this hope to my community, region, and Nation; and just maybe, to the whole World!” (Speaker’s Bureau Participant, April 2017). After meeting speakers from the national Poor People’s Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival, one SB graduate explained, “I just get so doubtful of myself, but after listening to [speakers from the campaign] I feel lifted and just have a lot to say. I’m definitely not 100% confident but it sure did grow an extra 20%.”

One impact of the SB was to change the explanations for poverty held by participants. Most described a prior belief that poverty and hunger were their own fault. By the end of the workshop series, participants frequently contrasted their explanations for poverty and hunger with those held by others.

“It’s easy to lump ‘the poor’ all together like it’s one thing. A blight, a shame, a problem that doesn’t go away. They’d like to sweep us under a rug, shoo us away like gnats...They think we don’t want to work, pay our own way, succeed in life. They think [poverty] is a choice we made.”

The term “people with lived experience” has become commonly used among FBST staff and SB participants and seems useful in helping people acknowledge their experiential knowledge and their own expertise. As well, they use the term “context expert” to recognize the importance of experiential knowledge, in contrast with “content experts,” who are “professionals, service providers, and leaders with formal power who have knowledge, tools, and resources” to address issues (Attygale 2017). SB participants are encouraged to tell “their stories,” during the SB workshops and are encouraged to share them with the public at the SB graduation. Their stories are frequently told as stories of struggle and survival. Some also narrate an experience of coming to awareness and joining an organization, a form of story frequently cultivated in social movements (Marshall Ganz 2011; Reinsborough and Canning 2010). The SB training has included explicit training in public speaking and telling their stories, drawing on a variety of inputs, including Toastmasters and a Story Circle led by the local organization Civic Ensemble drawing on Roadside Theater’s Story Circle techniques (Roadside Theater 1999).

Participants acknowledged that their initial motivation was due to material incentives.

“They explained the concept of a ‘Speakers’ Bureau’ and offered me a role. I said ‘yes,’ but I had no idea what they were talking about. I heard ‘stipend’ and ‘free classes’ and the possibility of travel, etc. I came



primarily for the incentives at first, I must admit” (Interview, July 2016).

Gas cards and stipends clearly make ongoing participation possible. A frequently cited benefit was also the camaraderie and connection they built with the other women. One participant stated, “We have supported each other and held each other through a lot of stuff.”

After participating in the SB training, nearly every person interviewed described a desire to give back to the pantries that had helped them, to their communities and to the broader society. One participant explained,

“The advocacy I’ve done in the past is on a smaller scale, more of a one-on-one thing, and I love it, but to be a leader, I want to be able to say that I can... do things that are going to have a positive impact on a broader range of people” (SB Participant, July 2016).

The SB training also instilled the desire to influence elected officials. When asked what they wanted elected officials to know, one participant exclaimed, “Get off your asses, get out from behind your desks. Start really seeing the people and hearing the people and actually make some changes in the system” (SB Participant, July 2016). Participants often expressed the hope that their stories could offer necessary information and awareness for policymakers.

“I just think they need to wake up and see reality...that the people that are using these pantries aren’t leeches, parasites, or jobless bums... Like, come do my job for a day or live the way that the people that visit the pantry and I live before you try to cut funding or tell us that it’s not needed.” (SB Participant, July 2016).

A related theme was that the SB allowed participants to visualize their potential impact in their communities. One described the opportunity to speak on a panel about her experiences of poverty and hunger and lobby legislators during the March 2017 Feeding America’s National Anti-Hunger Policy Conference in Washington, DC. She later wrote,

“In the first week of March my daughter and I had the privilege to attend and speak at Feeding America’s annual National Anti-Hunger Policy Conference in Washington, DC... We were asked to speak because we are ‘persons with lived experience’ who’ve been trained to speak, through the agency of the Food Bank of the Southern Tier, as their Speakers Bureau, to raise awareness about the issues of poverty, especially hunger. And we’re advocates to end the crises as soon as possible. To do this we ask to be heard by the public, and by our elected representatives, and our stories to influence policy in organizations and Government. And we hope to save programs that are working; with-

out which, much and grievous suffering will continue to accelerate” (Rogers 2017).

In addition, FBST has made steps to include SB graduates in leadership positions in the organization. One SB grad was invited to join FBST’s board of directors. Another was hired for an Americorps-VISTA position on the staff of the organization. Both make valuable contributions to FBST’s decision-making. Others have found volunteer opportunities with FBST and its network and are hopeful that their involvement will lead to paid opportunities.

A common theme was that participating in the SB workshops was invigorating at the same time as it was tiring. While presenting in a sociology class, one SB member said, “I love the Speaker’s Bureau but I’m tired of telling my story.” Other participants mentioned demands on their time, including work, childcare, going to food pantries, requirements by other social service agencies. It is not unusual for initiatives involving participation by service recipients to create fatigue (Cornwall 2008).

FBST is developing methods for evaluating the impact of the SB on participants and on the organization. Even so, preliminary evidence of participant narratives suggests that the advocacy and education program has contributed to participants’ sense of purpose, clearer understanding of poverty as a structural issue, motivation for leadership and opportunities for involvement.

## Phases of organizational change

The next section of data was compiled based on a participatory process with our core team: myself, the FBST president and key staff. We collectively analyzed the phases of inquiry which we compiled in a chart (see Table 1). For each phase, we examined who participated, the knowledge and theories that influenced our work, shared questions and goals, organizational changes and key events, methods we used to acquire new knowledge, and new questions that emerged. I developed the following narrated summary of the chart, which we circulated to ensure accuracy.

### Phase 1

In 2012, the FBST President was featured on a public panel with national leaders of the movement to end poverty. She and I met and began to discuss a collaborative inquiry, acknowledging the importance of a structural analysis of poverty.

Our initial collaboration focused on collaborating to teach the public about causes of hunger. We agreed to build a team at the FBST, develop their awareness of structural causes and possibilities for ending hunger, and involve them in expanding the food bank’s Hunger Education program. The

**Table 1** Collaborative inquiry and phases of organizational change

When	Participants	Inputs: new knowledge and theories	Questions and methods	Organizational changes/key events	Critical new questions
<b>Phase 1</b>					
2012–2014	President, key staff, AS	President takes part in Pedagogy of the Poor panel with Poverty Initiative Data on poverty as structural Poverty Initiative immersion program	How to teach the public, especially area youth about causes of hunger? Interdisciplinary committee of regional experts selected by the president	Hunger education position Curriculum committee Poverty Initiative immersion program and workshop at annual agency conference Hamilton Speaker's Bureau Leader keynotes annual agency conference	Why is there hunger? What are misconceptions about hunger held by staff, volunteers, the general public? How to raise awareness of structural causes of hunger and poverty?
<b>Phase 2</b>					
2015	President, key staff and AS	Collective Impact training Key staff join Closing the Hunger Gap Leadership Team President and AS attend Liberation Economics training: social movement approach to ending poverty Narrative change; Leadership development	What are clients' experiences at food pantries? Focus groups with pantry users from each county	Key staff attend Closing the Hunger Gap conference Creation of advocacy and education position Systematic listening to pantry users	What are best practices in social justice food banking? What are the daily lived experiences of people who experience poverty and hunger?
2016	President, key staff, AS, students		Develop Speakers Bureau for FBST. How can clients be trained to tell their stories of hunger and poverty? What are attitudes and behaviors of pantry volunteers and coordinators regarding poverty and pantry users? Student interviews and participant observation at pantries.	Establishment of Speaker's Bureau Speaker's Bureau workshop series and graduation, Generation 1	How does FBST practice change with awareness of pantry users' experiences? How can FBST cultivate leadership of pantry users? What educational processes are required to change pantry volunteers' attitudes and behaviors?
<b>Phase 3</b>					
2017	President, key staff and AS, students, SB grads (Generation 1 and 2)	Poverty as structural	Analyze attitudes and behaviors of pantry volunteers and coordinators Interviews Participant observation	New strategic plan Key staff attend Closing the Hunger Gap annual conference. Speaker's Bureau workshop series and graduation, Generation 2 FBST receives requests for how to begin Speaker's Bureau programs from 22 + food banks. Creation of community education position	Challenges of jealousy, competition, economic survival for SB participants Awareness of dominant attitudes and behaviors What processes are required to change FB structures and practices?

Table 1 (continued)

When	Participants	Inputs: new knowledge and theories	Questions and methods	Organizational changes/key events	Critical new questions
2018	President, key staff and AS, students, SB grads (Generation 1 and 2)	Trauma Informed Care training for staff Workshop series for FBST Management Team on Poverty as structural		SB grad joined FBST Board of Directors SB grad joined FBST staff as AmeriCorps VISTA FBST Management Team Workshop series	How can involvement of participants change the FBST?

organization created a hunger education position and created an interdisciplinary curriculum committee of regional experts selected by the president to develop a hunger education curriculum.

Questions arose as it became clear that definitions of hunger and theories of its causes were uneven even within the curriculum committee. Even so, FBST staff began to implement the curriculum and students piloted workshops in area schools. We focused on misconceptions about hunger held by staff, concerns about the charity model, and on the approach, including data and pedagogy, that could best raise awareness about the causes of hunger.

In January 2013, FBST engaged in its first collaboration with the movement end poverty. The president and hunger education staff worked with the Poverty Initiative of Union Theological Seminary to host a poverty immersion program, bringing students from the seminary and community leaders from partner organizations in the northeast U.S. to learn about social realities in the Southern Tier. The immersion leaders asked FBST how their organization could be part of a social movement to end poverty. The experience helped the president identify staff and volunteers who already held a structural analysis and raised a question that would carry through all the phases of research of how to best cultivate awareness of structural causes of hunger and poverty.

**Phase 2**

In a second phase, from 2015 to 2016, the president and the core team began to seek and incorporate new connections and information to answer the emerging questions. FBST began to dedicate staff time and resources to learn about best practices in social justice food banking. Staff members attended the Closing the Hunger Gap conference hosted by the Oregon Food Bank and learned about their Voices Project, which foregrounds pantry users’ experience and opinions in developing respectful interactions at pantries. The president and staff visited The Stop Community Food Centre in Toronto, known as an example of a community center model of food bank. Staff began to reference innovative anti-hunger organizations, including The Stop, DC Central Kitchen, Collective Impact, and others. They also actively engaged with critics of the charity food banking model, notably sponsoring a community forum in March 2018 with Andy Fisher, author of *Big Hunger: The Unholy Alliance Between Corporate America and Anti-Hunger Groups* (2017).

With the support of the president, new ideas and models were shared not only within the organization but across the agencies served by the FBST. In 2015, FBST staff participated in a training about Collective Impact (CI) (Kania and Kramer 2011), a model for coordinating efforts across government, business, philanthropy, non-profit organizations

and individuals, and invited a CI leader to keynote the agency conference. Key staff participated in the conferences and joined the leadership team of Closing the Hunger Gap, (<https://thehungergap.org/>), a network of anti-hunger organizations including food banks that challenge the corporate approach of the broader Feeding America network and are committed to addressing root causes of hunger and poverty. As well, the president invited me to join her in attending a three-day training on Liberation Economics led by United for a Fair Economy, a non-profit based in Boston. As these examples suggest, FBST sought influences that went beyond business models and corporate-anti-hunger alliances, as described by Fisher (2017), to include social movement organizations, innovative food banks and anti-hunger and anti-poverty organizations.

With these new models, our inquiry began to focus more about clients' life experiences and their experiences at food pantries. In Summer 2015, FBST sponsored a series of focus groups with food access program users from each county in their service area. They asked participants how they feed their families; the biggest problems they face; main reasons why they and their communities don't have enough food; and the advice they would give to policy makers to change policy (FBST Community Focus Group Facilitator's Guide 2015). In eight focus groups, they engaged nearly 80 participants "in a discussion about their lives and the challenges they face in getting by on limited or low incomes" (FBST 2015). Key staff began to notice and discuss the contradiction that, as one explained, "We had never systematically listened to our clients. That's ridiculous!"

By 2016, our inquiry team and a core FBST team was listening more to clients and drawing attention to the contradiction between providing food and the indignity of pantry experiences. FBST created a new position and hired an Advocacy and Education manager, who brought experience in Action Research and international development and began to focus on leadership development and organizational change. She worked to develop what became known as the Speaker's Bureau. Pantry users and participants in food access programs were selected by application for a nine-week leadership program, including "training in advocacy, food bank operations, public speaking, conflict resolution, and general education about the root causes of hunger" (Speakers' Bureau 2016, p. 3). At a graduation ceremony in June, seven participants shared their stories "about their journey from pantry patron to food justice advocate" (p. 3).

The Speaker's Bureau became a learning experience as much for FBST staff as for the participants. As a result, the core staff began to build more significant relationships with people with lived experience in poverty. Activities increasingly focused on cultivating leadership and on changing narratives about people experiencing hunger and poverty. A lively Facebook group became a medium through which

Speaker's Bureau graduates communicated regularly despite rural isolation.

At the same time, FBST guided college students in conducting participant observation at pantries and interviews with pantry volunteers and coordinators, to learn about attitudes and behaviors toward food pantry users. After student research showed that attitudes ranged from contempt to compassion, our group also began to inquire about the educational process required to change pantry volunteers' attitudes and behaviors.

### Phase 3

In the most recent phase, our learning and research continued as the advocacy program staff, college students, and SB participants studied political-economic trends in New York State, interviewed food pantry volunteers and conducted participant observation at food pantries. We deepened relationships with a national network of poor people's organizations that offers ethical principles, sociological analysis and reference points for our project. Already in 2016, FBST had signed onto the national Poor People's Campaign, referencing the campaign initiated in 1967 by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. just prior to his assassination (Poor People's Campaign 2016). The Campaign calls for organizations to build a "fusion politics" based in "nonviolent moral direct action" and lifting up the voices of those most directly impacted by interlocking oppressions (Poor People's Campaign 2018).

Building on this learning, the organization has incorporated lessons from our research into its strategic plan. We identified the need to address pantry volunteers' commitment to a charity model and internalized disempowerment among participants in food access programs.

By this phase, FBST had become acknowledged nationally among the Closing the Hunger Gap network (CTHG). The president explained, "CTHG said, if we need to solve hunger, we need to look at root causes." With this network, FBST has created opportunities to use its emerging justice platform to shift discourse nationally.

In 2017, the Speaker's Bureau completed its second year. FBST invited and paid for SB participants to travel to Albany for a legislative lobby day, and to the Anti-Hunger Policy Conference in Washington DC. At the Policy Conference, the graduates received a standing ovation for their presentation (Rogers 2017). In October 2017, the Poor People's Campaign chose Binghamton, NY, as the location for their mass meeting, acknowledging FBST's work with "people with lived experience in poverty." Twelve Speaker's Bureau graduates and three FBST staff led a workshop called "Pass the Mic: Storytelling and Leadership of the Poor" for the Faith for a Fair New York conference, organized by the Labor-Religion Coalition as part of building the Poor People's Campaign in New York State.

Agency leaders also encouraged both “generations” of SB graduates to seek opportunities and interact with each other. In these interactions, they noticed examples of solidarity and mutual support, as well as conflict, jealousy, competition, and even frustrations with the limits of the program. While at first concerned about the reputation of the program, agency leaders realized that these conflicts were an expression of the distresses the women experienced as a result of their economic precariousness.

As a result of the presentations at the Anti-Hunger Policy Conference, FBST has begun to receive inquiries from Food Banks across the country about how to begin Speaker’s Bureau programs and how learn from FBST’s efforts (Quackenbush, personal communication, May 10, 2017). In addition, in 2017, FBST was recognized by Feeding America as the Food Bank of the Year (Food Bank of the Southern Tier 2017), which may also strengthen its platform.

## Discussion and analysis of changes in organizational practices from 2008 to 2018

To interpret the above findings, I analyzed written reflections by core team members and detailed notes from a core team meeting that focused on analysis. Core team members sent written reflections via email in April 2017 and in June 2017 and are used by permission. To analyze these, I applied the following categories, adapted from Fisher (2017): (1) changes in problem definition, whom the organization serves and outcomes measured, (2) increased funding for advocacy, and (3) impacts of its advocacy and education on stakeholders. I then shared this analysis with the core team and incorporated their feedback during 2018. While analysis in conventional research is typically written by in objective, reporting language, this section incorporates quotes from the core team so as to acknowledge the collaborative character of analysis in an AR process.

### Defining the problem and its solutions

The core team discussed the changes in the organization’s definition of hunger over the last 16 years. The organization shifted from being “inward-focused, focused on program growth and development, fundraising, policies and procedures, becoming a “best in class” food bank, etc.” to being “more outward-facing, i.e. focused on the problem of hunger and food insecurity, how it manifests in our community and how we can leverage our resources most effectively to address it (email communication, April 21, 2017). The shift from inward to outward orientation reflects a shift from addressing hunger as a technical problem of food distribution to one that requires social change.

Core team members described a change in the organization’s role and its definition of its stakeholders. In the past, its role was to be in service of the pantries, food programs, and other agencies that distributed food.

“In the past, our clients were our member agencies and we thought about how to provide them with better services. Today, our clients are those in need of food and we’re asking ourselves different questions” (email communication, April 21, 2017).

“It used to be that the emergency food system was organized around the needs of volunteers. What we’ve been doing is attempting to organize it around the needs of the people we serve” (Meeting, June 15 2018).

A pivotal change was when staff and leaders began to focus on individuals who need food. A key ingredient in this change was that these leaders committed to treating people experiencing poverty as people with dignity, knowledge from experience, and rights.

Today, the organization measures its social impact instead of exclusively focusing on pounds of food distributed. While the FBST still tracks pounds of food distributed, number of volunteers, requests for food, and dollars raised, they have added new outcomes such as “debunking stereotypes about hunger and food insecurity” and “engaging stakeholders’ heads, hands and hearts,” which are admittedly “not as easy to measure and track.”

Core team members sometimes express criticism of other service providers. They describe false explanations of hunger and poverty held by volunteers or service providers, such as “if only people still knew how to cook,” or poor people “should just get a job.” They express criticism of FBST’s prior approach to service.

“The food bank used to be like, ‘Here are the scraps from our broken food system,’ and they’d justify themselves by saying, ‘if you’re hungry, you’ll eat anything.’” (Meeting, June 15, 2018).

They also recognize obstacles for other food banks, acknowledging why food banks stick with the “old model” of focusing on efficient food distribution and the needs of volunteers rather than the need for food.

“The old model can be very self-serving to food banks. Food banks are well-resourced and well-respected... Lots of food banks don’t want to make waves because it’s going to impact their funding” (Meeting, June 15, 2018).

An important aspect of problem definition for the core team surrounds their beliefs and values about hunger, charity, and justice. In July 2018, the core team discussed a title

for this paper. One draft title included the phrase “from charity to justice.” In discussion, we realized this language was the title of the Closing the Hunger Gap conference which staff had attended. But for some, leaving charity behind entirely seemed unrealistic. Instead, a team member stated, “we like to use the two feet model from Catholic Social Teaching which says that both charity and justice are necessary for change.” The two feet model critiques efforts that rely only on charity, but acknowledges that both addressing systemic, root causes of problems and short-term emergency assistance are necessary (United States Conference of Bishops 2018). Referring to Catholic Social Teachings offers legitimacy for the food bank, as the organization is an agency of Catholic Charities.

Members of the core team identify with and are proud of the recent changes and see themselves as leaders responsible to inform and motivate others. “Now we know we have to get everybody to the table.” They acknowledge that feeding the hungry can be a way to pull people into deeper conversations. “How do we meet them where they’re at, gently bring them along the path to recognize that distributing food is not the only way?” “If we get youth involved, we’d be building young minds... they could grow up to be anti-hunger advocates” (Meeting, June 15, 2018).

While the core team notices differences across the food bank’s departments in terms of definitions of the problem and its solutions, there are indications of a cultural shift, of both discourse and practices (Dodd and Nelson 2018). “We’re also seeing changes within the agency, finally seeping into other departments... We’re spreading ideas, learning and deepening the work within the organization” (Meeting, June 15, 2018). When hunger education began in 2009, the president justified youth hunger education to the board of directors primarily because parents donated when their kids learned about hunger. But now the board understands the importance of advocacy for its own sake. A staff member explains, her co-workers do not bring together women living in poverty (the SB participants) just in order to get funding, although some funders do appreciate the value of the SB initiative. Instead, they “live the mission... Everything we do has the client at the center; this has permeated our culture” (personal communication, June 2018).

## Conclusions

### Reflections about collaborative inquiry and AR

In evaluation, there are strengths and limitations of the collaborative inquiry with stakeholders from a regional food bank. In listing benefits of the experience, core team members appreciated the opportunity to document, notice, reflect on the organization’s changes (Meeting, July 2018).

Both core team participants and SB members appreciated the involvement of people with lived experience in poverty along with professionals with formal organizational power. SB participants noticed that their knowledge was valued and could contribute meaningfully to improving the work of the food bank. In reflections on their involvement in AR research with sociology students, SB members appreciated that their experiences were valued; they were glad to practice research skills and appreciated contributing to knowledge creation. Individual participants appreciated the opportunity to contribute to FBST’s practices.

Limitations of this project include both the depth and breadth of participation. The core team, including me, originally assumed, based on our knowledge of Action Research, that participants should be involved in all phases of research. However, this turned out to be ambitious and not always best for participants. As Cornwall (2008) acknowledges, no matter how participatory they seem, participants sometimes regard spaces that they are invited to as means to gain benefits or improve their own access to services, which is very understandable. SB members described contributing to changes in the Food Bank as simultaneously exciting, inspiring, empowering and exhausting, due to the fatigue of survival, parenting, and navigating social services. It is critical for service-providers who plan participatory spaces to be aware of these limitations. Rather than assume that greater participation would be better for all members of the team, Cornwall’s (2008) concept of optimal participation was useful. As our collaborative inquiry continues, it will be important to assess participation according to this more nuanced measurement instead of assuming a linear progression in participation.

Conducting collaborative inquiry as a community-campus partnership also created space for sharing knowledge and reflecting among professionals and between service providers and those who receive services. Although relationships of trust and collaboration were built, there should be no pretense that this process leveled social hierarchies. Discomfort among service providers with social power differences evidences their willingness to question power relationships and unequal material conditions but does not overcome these inequalities. Some community center food banks models and social movement organizations might model social relations of dignity as they strive to address structural inequalities.

### Reflections on organizational change

Program participants, leadership and staff have contributed to change the organization, from vision and strategic plan to implementation. The FBST’s aspiration to interact with a new epistemic community is evidenced by the leaders and staff whose networks extend beyond the dominant anti-hunger networks, and by participation of SB participants in

these networks. There is evidence of openness to new concepts and paradigms and to ongoing self-critique. Leaders, staff and program participants have sought opportunities to learn from food banks as well as social movement organizations and networks around the country and take risks to implement new practices and repertoires. The organization has added a substantial set of new activities, including listening to participants, educational workshops, leadership development training, and collaborative inquiry.

As we have documented, ideas and practices, including the concept of poverty as structural and the commitment of listening to those who need food, have spread beyond the Advocacy and Education department. Across its departments, the organization has built a new commitment to listen to people living in poverty who need food. Resources dedicated to advocacy and education are substantial and challenge staff to develop new skills. As the organization envisions its role as leading other organizations in the region in the effort to end hunger and poverty, it is developing new repertoires of action. There are also indications of a new organizational compass which goes beyond the corporate model, with values of dignity, respect and mutual care articulated in its strategic plans and enacted in SB meetings.

Although the program is new, and staff acknowledge the need for further evaluation, participants offer preliminary evidence that the Speaker's Bureau has had positive impacts on their self-esteem. Participant have challenged internalized shame, changed their understandings of the causes of poverty, and gained motivation and opportunities for leadership. Future efforts should aim to mitigate participation fatigue and develop organizational practices that support genuine involvement and opportunities. As our collaborative inquiry continues, subsequent steps will be to document impacts of the SB on staff, board members, donors and others.

From organizational change and community development perspectives, these changes may be cautiously interpreted as a step beyond a charity model. From a social movement perspective, for FBST to be a leader in a regional movement to end hunger, as its latest strategic plan suggests, will require its impact to exceed its own organizational boundaries. Further implementation will be necessary to educate the public about the roots of hunger in structural poverty, to provide leadership among anti-hunger organizations, and to build support in new communities in the region. As dispossession continues in New York's southern tier, FBST may do well to connect with social movement organizations in the state and with national networks, such as by expanding involvement with the Poor People's Campaign and the broader movement to end poverty, which recognize that structural problems such as poverty are unassailable if they are addressed piecemeal.

Despite FBST's achievements, deep concerns regarding the emergency food system remain. The organization

should engage in ongoing reflection including studying critiques of the emergency food regime, including Poppendieck (1999), Fisher (2017), and Winne (2008). Organizational self-study could include critical questions such as these: How can the organization get out of the cycle of growth and contribute to significantly reducing food distribution, or "shortening the line"? How can it overcome the influence of its capital campaign and its building structuring its activities? How can it avoid tendencies of corporate culture that prevent risk-taking and innovation? How can the organization redefine its corporate partnerships so that corporate priorities do not limit its approach to ending poverty and hunger? Can FBST continue to shift resources toward broad-based efforts to end poverty?

A fundamental question is of the relationship between charity and justice. In emphasizing the Catholic Social Teachings, FBST acknowledges that coordinating the "two feet" of charity and justice requires discussion about morality, values and politics. It requires challenging power dynamics both within and beyond the organization. Expanding their epistemic communities may offer additional references and innovative models, such as the Black Panther Party's free breakfast distribution, survival projects within the movement to end poverty (Baptist and Rehmann 2011), and the human right to food (Chilton and Rose 2009).

## Implications

This project offers empirical evidence that food regimes in general and the emergency food regime in particular, are indeed dynamic constellations. In focusing on food banks, we acknowledge constraints, including their entrenchment in relationships with corporate funding and their tendency to provide a moral safety valve, but hold out the possibility that they might provide leadership and resources that can go beyond charity. As Winne (2008) acknowledges, leaders of food banks are particularly well positioned to promote "a vital public discourse around hunger, food insecurity and poverty" (p. 76).

Increasing evidence suggests (Dodd and Nelson 2018; Galinson 2018) that it may be possible for food banks to shift their discourse and practices. In this case, a collaborative inquiry, guided by principles of AR has involved food bank leaders and staff, people living in poverty and college students, in asking and answering questions about how a food bank can move beyond charity. In this process, FBST demonstrates characteristics of a learning organization (McNiff and Whitehead 2000). As our collaboration continues, we join critics of charity food banks in acknowledging the impact food banks may have if they put their authority, lived experience and networks to the task of building a movement to end hunger and poverty.

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