Rumbles from the Stomach of Europe:
Tackling the issue of hunger and food insecurity as demonstrated through
the concept and growth of food banks in the European Union

Kellie Sharpe
The University of South Carolina (USA)
and Masaryk University (Czech Republic)
International Studies
sharpekm@mailbox.sc.edu

"All I have is a voice
To undo the folded lie,
The romantic lie in the brain
Of the sensual man-in-the-street
And the lie of Authority
Whose buildings grope the sky:
There is no such thing as the State
And no one exists alone;
Hunger allows no choice
To the citizen or the police;
We must love one another or die."
-W. H. Auden's "September 1, 1939"
[Auden 1940: Lines 78-88; bolded added]

I. Introduction:

"In moral terms, just stating the fact that one child dies every five seconds
as a result of hunger and malnutrition should be enough to prove that we
cannot afford to allow the scourge of hunger to continue…In economic
terms the case is more complex but no less cogent…On a global scale,
every year that hunger persists at current levels causes deaths and
disability that will cost developing countries future productivity with a
present discounted value of US$500 billion or more." [FAO 2004]

Often when the subject of hunger is discussed, it is discussed in broad, global terms.
Nonetheless, even though people use the term "global" what they actually picture in their
minds is normally limited to the developing world, specifically Sub-Saharan Africa.
Perhaps it is easier to consider a lonely child with skinny limbs and a bloated stomach far
away in Africa versus the kid down the block who looks like one's own child in the
developed world. The former image is certainly easier to sell when attempting to raise
support and push for action. Due to this, developed states' government policies often
reflect farsightedness in regards to the issue of food insecurity. This is demonstrated not
by the existence of policies to combat hunger in developing countries because these do
exist and are of critical importance. Instead, the farsightedness gets played out by the
relative absence of policies to decrease the number of food insecure people in their own
developed countries.

Yet, this situation is labeled global for a reason, and the discussion of hunger is an
essential one to engage in during the present. Food insecurity is one way in which
millions of people are excluded from the prospect of a prosperous present and a better
future. It has many people trapped in invisible handcuffs. Hunger does not only affect
those whose stomachs are empty. The effects of it creep across society in numerous
forms. Some of these consequences are direct while others are more indirect. In some
areas such as finances, both kinds of effects exist. Directly, hunger has an affect on the
pocketbook of European countries through the added medical cost that comes as a result
of hunger. When people are hungry, their immune systems cannot function properly

since they are not getting all of the proper nutrition that they require. Therefore, society ends up bearing the financial costs of hunger related hospital bills including problematic pregnancies, low birth weight infants, childhood anemia, and more. There is also an indirect financial cost. In an age when Europe's population is growing older and more people are leaving the work force and relying on the government to provide living pensions, hunger further reduces the workforce due to absenteeism from work, disabilities from poor nutrition, and premature death from starvation. Not only does this further reduction in the labor force reduce the number of tax dollars coming into the system but it increases the demands for those same diminishing stocks of financial capital. Thousands of jobs remain undone which decreases the overall productivity of the state. Another indirect effect is the social unrest that hunger causes. There is a correlation between hunger and crime that cannot be ignored. In addition to an increase in crime, there are other forms of social unrest that are demonstrated through riots and protests. If the European Union wants to build a truly great entity, her answer to the people's implicit and explicit cries for food cannot mirror one historical predecessor who infamously replied, "feed them cake." Ignorance did not work then nor will it suffice now.

There are food insecure people on every continent and in every state in the world. This includes Europe. Within the prosperous European Union, there exist millions of hungry and food insecure citizens and inhabitants. So the question concerns how Europe is addressing this critical need. **What is the most effective way for Europe to deal with the issue of food insecurity in order to avoid significant negative social consequences?**

In the following paper, I will argue that neither a single-handed approach by a nation(s)'s government(s) or an effort by non-governmental organizations alone will be sufficient to address hunger. Instead, I will argue that in order to effectively deal with hunger and food insecurity, a partnership between the government, the private world, and nonprofit organizations is required. With their various motives and resources, the three different spheres can join to form a hunger fighting coalition. Particularly, I will provide an example of the way that such a system is played out in the realms of Europe's food banking network.

II. Theoretical Background

Many social scientists and researchers are hailing a united Europe as the land of the next great global player. Yet the nations of the European Union appear to be approaching this role through an entirely different outlook than previous world powers. In his book *The European Dream*, Jeremy Rifkin argues that whereas "the American Dream puts an emphasis on economic growth, personal wealth, and independence[, t]he new European Dream focuses more on sustainable development, quality of life, and interdependence" [Rifkin 2004:13-14]. Such differences in the United States and the European Union's view of the future have led and will continue to lead to a fundamentally different approach to social welfare. Whereas America currently maintains more of a hands-off approach with regards to ensuring the social welfare of her citizens since the system

Kellie Sharpe   3

relies on the individual helping him or herself, the European governments view themselves as a critical player in the wellbeing of their citizens. "There is a belief that market forces, if left to their own devices, are often unfair, and therefore, need to be tamed. Government redistribution, in the form of transfers and payments to those less fortunate, is considered an appropriate antidote to unrestrained market capitalism. That is why in Europe the notion of creating social democracies-a mixed system that balances market forces with government assistance-has flourished since World War II" [Rifkin 2004:43]. Studies have shown that without Europe's current social welfare system, over a quarter of the population of the European Union would find themselves living beneath the poverty line [European Federation of Food Banks 2008]. Therefore, social welfare becomes not just a matter of so called "social responsibility" but rather a key element to the maintained of the social fabric of society.

A critical aspect of the social system is food security or its inverse, food insecurity. Food insecurity is a dynamic concept that has been developing since its initial conception during the mid-1970s. Originally, the discussion of food insecurity came about during a period of time in which there was an international food crisis. The topic then was focused on food supply problems and sought to ensure the availability and price of food. At that time the World Food Summit defined food security as the "availability at all times of adequate world food supplies of basic foodstuffs to sustain a steady expansion of food consumption and to offset fluctuations in production and prices." This concept was regularly expanded "to include securing access by vulnerable people to available supplies, implying that attention should be balanced between the demand and supply side of the food security equation." There came a recognition that the actions of various vulnerable people was an important factor and that technology as demonstrated in the Green Revolution was alone not enough to automatically reduce hunger issues [FAO 2003].

There has been increasing recognition of the prevalence of food insecurity both on the individual level and on a global scale. Food security has come to be recognized as being "when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food which meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life. Household food security is the application of this concept to the family level, with individuals within households as the focus of concern." Food insecurity meanwhile "exists when people do not have adequate physical, social or economic access to food as defined above" [FAO 2003].

The European Union is not often mentioned, however, when discussing such issues. Yet, the facts are quite startling. Approximately seventy-two million Europeans or about sixteen percent of the population are at risk of poverty and therefore hunger. These numbers include a range from people who face chronic problems in regards to finding food to eat to those who are hit by an unexpectedly high electrical bill and must choose between paying it or providing food for themselves and their families. Statistically this comes across as seventy-two million Europeans whose household incomes are below sixty percent of the national equilvalized income average [Eurostat 2008]. Those members who fall below this marker are not necessarily in poverty or hungry. What it

does mean though is that they are at risk of falling into poverty and therefore food insecurity. Not all European states are equal in this regard. The highest poverty rates are to be found in Slovakia, Ireland, and Greece where the average is about 21%. The lowest rates are seen in the Czech Republic [Eurostat 2008]. The Czech Republic is an unlikely recipient of such a placement unless one knows that half of the group of latest European Union members perform better in regards to keeping their citizens out of poverty than the average for the fifteen older European Union member countries [Eurostat 2008].

These millions of people who find themselves facing the issue of hunger on a regular basis come from all walks of life. One of the most common stereotypes about the kind of people who are hungry includes the myth that the majority of those seeking food assistance are homeless. There also exists the stereotype that those who are hungry are simply too lazy to work enough to provide for themselves. However, as is often true, these misconceptions are a far cry from reality. In fact, it is estimated that there are hungry people in every neighborhood. It is a problem that spans gender, ethnicity, and nationality.

With this many people of such diverse background facing the issue of hunger, the impacts of it on society are multifold. Hunger does not occur in a vacuum. There are many societal costs. They are both direct and indirect. Directly, there is a significant medical cost to hunger which adds up on doctor's bill, emergency hospitalizations, etc. These costs come from medical complications that arise from malnutrition including but not excluded to deficient immune systems, stunted growth, underweight newborns, etc. Globally, the medical costs of hunger are estimated to be approximately thirty billion U.S. dollars every year [FAO 2004].

Indirect costs of hunger include billions of U.S. dollars that are lost yearly due to a loss of productivity. Hunger and food insecurity can lead to premature death or health loss, disability, absence from the workplace, etc. which all mean result in a less productive society [FAO 2004]. These people are not only no longer contributing to society by generating revenue and earning an income for themselves, but they then rely increasingly upon that same system to support them. Therefore, government welfare systems are hit twice by the same source because the those affected by hunger quit being able to add to the system by paying taxes or their contribution is reduced as their earnings decrease while at the same time those people need heavier assistance from the government to replace their decline in income. As the European Union anticipates the average age of her population increasing almost 15 years by 2050 with the result that a disproportional number of people will be retiring [Rifkin 2004:253-254], European governments will be taking in far less taxes and being asked to provide more money in terms of retirement benefits. Any additional burden on the system has far reaching impacts. Hunger simply takes away more of the increasingly limited resources. Finally, there is also the correlation between social unrest and hunger. Crime is higher in areas of countries where hunger and food insecurity are higher. It is a cycle which perpetuates itself and when unaddressed only increase.

III. Effectively Dealing with the Issue of Hunger

To be sure, the issue of hunger is not going to disappear or fade away quietly. It is a means of exclusion, whether initial of not, that bars certain people from the prospect of a secure today and a healthy and happy future. Throughout history, people have recognized this fact. In different societies and during various ages, people have sought to resolve the issue of hunger in various ways. Traditionally there have been two approaches to hunger management: by means of the government or by means of the not-for-profit world.

During recent history, different societies have recognized that in the current international system of capitalism, many people are left in the shadows. With such a recognition, some governments have resultantly recognized the responsibility they hold to alleviate or to at least lessen the wrongs of this system. The extreme form of this was demonstrated in the Marxist and Leninist theories which maintain that capitalism requires the domination of the majority of society to benefit the few. Their response was that the working people should and would rise up to claim their rights and equality. The manner in which such ideas played out in reality was a governmental system which held sole responsibility for guaranteeing that every individual had an adequate supply of healthy food to eat. In reality, this resulted in simply a broader spread of people being equally hungry. Through the extreme of the great famines endured by the citizens of the USSR to the widespread long lines required to wait in order to get basic food items such as bread and flour which became symbolic of the economic failure throughout the Soviet Union, government by itself was shown to be an inadequate answer to the complicated issue of hunger.

On the other hand, there is the United States government's hands-off approach which is basically the opposite of the former USSR government's policies. Government is not seen to be responsible, and therefore the vast majority of the social welfare system in the United States must rely upon the not-for-profit world. Government is viewed "as a guarantor of individual property rights" and not as a guarantor of "the general welfare…of the less fortunate…From the very beginning, Americans preferred to keep taxes low and limit government involvement in the community…Helping the needy, in turn, became a matter of individual choice…That's why, for example, in America, unlike Europe, half of all U.S. colleges and hospitals, and two-thirds of the social service organizations, are in the not-for-profit sector rather than the public sector" [Rifkin 2004:33]. Proponents of the private sector argue that it is more able to fight issues including hunger because such organizations are more local and embedded in the needy communities. They are therefore more perceptive to the actual needs of the people while maintaining a greater work ethic than the supposed "red tape" of government can sustain [Rifkin 2004:34].

The problem with not-for-profit's combating hunger by themselves is that the private sector often lacks the resources to affect the change they desire. This is not solely a financial lack either, though often a lack of monetary resources does limit nonprofit organizations. Additionally, however, there is the barring fact that nongovernmental

organizations are merely treating the results of the issues. For example, with hunger, many times, such organizations are confined to dealing with those who are hunger today or perhaps seeking to prevent those who will go hungry tomorrow. Yet, either way, nongovernmental organizations do not change the system which creates the conditions for hunger to exist. If government policies related to food and all the other relevant areas (including wage standards, healthcare provision, childcare service etc) remain the same, the issue of hunger is not going to be resolved. This is because the conditions causing it still exist and though nongovernmental organizations may be quite effective in addressing the issue of getting people food and keeping more people from become at risk of food insecurity, they will always have to fight these same battles until the conditions which food insecurity is a result of are dealt with.

Therefore, since various attempts during our time have shown us that neither the government nor the private world is capable of effectively alleviating the issue of hunger and food insecurity by themselves, another alternative must be sought. The most effective means of tackling the multifaceted issue of hunger would be a multifaceted approach. In realty, this would look like a triangular partnership between the government, the nonprofit world, and the business community.

Each of these partners has a motivation for seeking to end food insecurity. Governments, to begin with, exist to better the lives of the people living within their boundaries. Governments must maintain a sense of legitimacy in the eyes of their people in order to keep stability and maintain themselves as a legitimate body of power. Hungry people have historically proven that they will call into question the legitimacy of a system that leaves a substantial amount of her people facing malnutrition. The not-for-profit world exists for the very reason of combating such issues. Their motivation is to succeed in righting a societal ill that they are attempting to address. Finally, corporations have motivation due to the increasing amount of scrutiny they are facing with regards to social responsibility. One study estimated that "about eighty-six percent of consumers say they chose to buy from companies known to support a cause" [McCarthy 2005]. There is a desirable amount of social kudos to be gained from consumers. This becomes a critical means of furthering a company's bottom line in an increasingly global and competitive market. Therefore, governments, not-for-profits, and the private world all have substantial reasons to join the partnership in an effort to alleviate issues like food insecurity in their own countries. Yet, how does this triangular relationship look? A catalyst for this approach is the development and spread of the food banking concept.

IV. Food Banking

Beginning in the 1960s, people began to recognize the existence of a need for some kind of organization which would supply nutritional food to low income people, create a encompassing system through which donations towards hunger relief could be effectively channeled, and to sustain a more regular flow of food to the multitude of local agencies seeking to feed their communities. Here was the conception of the idea to form "food banks." The first food bank was organized in Phoenix, Arizona in the United States. The idea did not remain stationary however, but instead it spread rapidly across the United

States and overflowed into Europe in 1984 when the first European food bank was created in Paris [European Federation of Food Banks 2008]. The idea was to create an organization whose purpose would be to help fight hunger by soliciting, storing, and distributing donated food product to partner agencies. These partner agencies are mostly organized on a local scale within specific communities where they understand the exact needs of their clients.

While local agencies are the ones to distribute and serve the donated food product to hungry and food insecure people, the food banks are the ones who filter the large donations of product and seek to assist such not for profit agencies in procuring a sustained and varied level of high quality food on a level that would never be possible for a single local organization to solicit, gather, and store. This role led to the creation of an increasing number of food banks. Yet, there needed to be some way to assist all of these independent organizations. They needed an overarching network to provide a means of facilitating communication between the food banks, spreading food resources and distribution that was in large bulk sizes evenly as need dictated, a means for the exchange of ideas and programs from food bank to food bank, and a way of even, regulated oversight to ensure that proper standards where being maintained and food safety protocol followed during the handling and storage of food. The recognition of this need led food banks across Europe to unite themselves under a nonprofit network spanning seventeen countries. It was founded in 1986, and is today called the "Fédération Européenne des Banques Alimentaires" (European Federation of Food Banks) [European Federation of Food Banks 2008]. The European Federation of Food Banks (FEBA) works to unite approximately 220 food banks which together handle almost 280,000 tons of food each year. This food is distributed to around 25,000 charitable organizations throughout the participating countries [European Federation of Food Banks 2008]. From its earliest days of conception to today on the grand scale now to be seen, the concept of a food banking network has developed and grown.

This international network of organizations is a good catalyst through which to analyze the triangular relationship between governments, corporations, and the nonprofit world in regards to the effort to alleviate food insecurity in Europe. Here we see the nonprofits being the local agencies serving and directly distributing food to the needy, the food banks themselves gathering, storing, and distributing food to the local agencies, and the international network overseeing and uniting the operations of them all. Various corporations such as manufacturing plants are providing together approximately 33% of the donated food product that is distributed [Vian 2008]. In addition, various private world companies donate time and services to the food banking network in order to increase their productivity and effectiveness. Finally, the government role is one of creating various policy initiatives that help support the food banking network while also learning from such agencies what the need is like, the extent of it, and the ways possible legislation could decrease the very need for such services in the first place by lessening the structural inequalities of a capitalist system which cause food insecurity in Europe. Another means through which European governments enter the triangular relationship is through the European Program of Aid to the Most Needy (PEAD). This policy initiative was created in 1987 by the European Commission which allowed for the free distribution

of European Union food reserves to the needy via accredited charitable organizations [Szulejewska 2008]. Today European Union products account for a little over half of all donated food product [Vian 2008].

So why is this system the most effective way for the European Union to deal with the issue of food insecurity? There are a number of reasons. Firstly, as shown before hunger is an issue that has many aspects. Therefore it requires many actors to join together to each tackle the issue from each's own area of effectiveness. This involves the aforementioned relationship between corporations, governments, and the nonprofit world. Not only does hunger require many different kinds of actors to contribute to the cause therefore making the food banking network and her partnerships affective, but this system is also sustainable long term.

The food banking network is sustainable for many reasons. First, has to do with the maintenance of the triangular relationship. If around one-third of donated food product comes from private corporations, then it is essential to maintain if not increase this particular role of corporations. I argue that this is best ensured by the international network system of food banks. Corporations give food product for various reasons. For some, it helps bottom line because it is a way to get redirect excess food or over-manufactured items or slightly damaged but still edible products. Rather than have to pay to throw the food away or otherwise dispose of it and lose further money, corporate donations provide a way of getting the excess product out of their warehouses with no extra effort having to be made by the company. Also, corporations that donate to charities can market this effort as an attempt to give back to the community and contribute to society's wellbeing. In a world of increasing corporate scrutiny, companies are finding such charitable policies to be essential to maintain customer satisfaction. Finally, since FEBA oversees the quality control of the donated food product by enforcing the government issued safety standards and procedures, corporations are guaranteed that the product that the companies give goes for the purpose they gave it (to help meet the need of hungry people), that is handled in a consistently professional manner, and that the food therefore does not expire and become unhealthy before it is given to needy individuals which would have reflected poorly on the corporations where individuals to get sick from their donated items. Therefore, in this regard, corporations tend to support private organizations over government organizations. The food banking network is a way of ensuring corporations' continued support without sacrificing the benefits governments have to offer in the fight against food insecurity.

Another reason that this system is sustainable is because of the government support that is involved. Such a partnership demonstrates that the government is trying to do something affective for the welfare of her people. With its success the government will maintain and increase her legitimacy in the eyes of the people. At the same time, governments will further their own stance as their citizens becomes more self-sustaining and less reliant on government welfare to provide essentials such as food. These are ways that the triangular relationship is sustainable because of the government's involvement.

A final reason why such a triangular relationship is sustainable is the presence of local charitable organizations within the relationship. Large corporations often have the means and resources to help. Governments can create and change policies to help and donate surplus food reserves. The food banks and their overarching network can solicit the help of both of the former groups but the key factor is feeding people. This is hard on a large scale. However, local community organizations are located within the very communities they seek to serve. They know the people who need food assistance and in what form that assistance should come. They can build the trust of the local populations and serve them directly. The personal element this provides is a crucial part of meeting the need and doing so in a sustainable manner. Therefore, in this and the aforementioned ways, a triangular approach is seen to be the most effective way to meet the issue of hunger in Europe both today and tomorrow.

V. Conclusion

In a world whose social fabric is weakening in many areas as financial resources decrease and yet which is simultaneously being called upon to address an increasing multitude of issues, hunger will continue to be a problem. With the current system, need is only going to continue to grow as resources to meet the need decreases. Yet it has been shown that a triangular relationship between nonprofits, corporations, and governments can address the issue of hunger. It can make the social welfare system more resilient in a time when that assurance is not guaranteed in other social areas. When food insecurity is addressed in a sustainable, comprehensive way, Europe is healthier and better able to focus on other pressing problems. It would prove beneficial to obtain more information about the profile of people who are hungry including their employment status, wage level, number of dependents, country of birth and current residence, etc. This further research would enable us to gain a clearer view of who exactly is in need which would help fight food insecurity by enabling programs to be tailor fit to the clientele. A more accurate picture of the current problem can help lead to a more direct and focused solution to the issue of food insecurity in the European Union.

VI. References

Auden, W. H. (1940), "September 1, 1939," *Another Time*, Faber and Random House.

European Federation of Food Banks (2008), <http://www.eurofoodbank.org/eng/index.ht m>, Bourg-la-Reine, France.

Eurostat (2008), "Social Inclusion" (2008), the European Commission, <http://epp.eurost at.ec.europa.eu/portal/page?_pageid=1996,45323734&_dad=portal&_schema=PO RTAL&screen=welcomeref&open=/&product=REF_SD_SC&root=REF_SD_SC &depth=3>.

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (2003 and 2004), <http://www. fao.org/documents/ >, Rome, Italy.

McCarthy, Ellen (6 Nov 2005), "How We Help; Choosing Causes With Caution," *The Washington Post*. Washington, D.C.: Nov 6, 2005. p.F.01.

Rifkin, Jeremy (2004), *The European Dream*, New York, Penguin Books Ltd.

Szulejewska, Mo. (2008), European Food Aid Programme, Federation of Polish Food Banks, <http://www.bankizywnosci.pl/eprojekty.html>, Warsaw, Poland.

Vian, Christiane (Director) (12 Feb 2008), *Presentation FEBA*, European Federation of Food Banks, Bourg-La-Reine, France.

World Health Organization: Regional Office for Europe (2008), "Nutrition and food security," <http://www.euro.who.int/Nutrition>, Copenhagen, Denmark