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Crap Dinner and the Good Food Box

It's a dismal setting for a renaissance. Scrapyards, boarded-up buildings and vacant lots dot this industrial wasteland in downtown Toronto. But in the back of an ancient brick warehouse there is life. A makeshift assembly line; men and women of all ages fill boxes with bananas, potatoes, oranges, carrots – all tantalizingly fresh. Homeless people work alongside students, Spanish-speakers alongside other Canadians.

These boxes of fresh fruit and vegetables will find their way that night into the kitchens of people in poor neighbourhoods across Toronto. Each customer has paid \$15 for their box; less than they'd pay at a supermarket for food of lower quality.

The Good Food Box is a pioneering effort to break the reliance of thousands of Canada's poor on food handouts. Caught between high unemployment, low wages and grossly inadequate social-assistance rates, poor Canadians often have no choice but to turn to free-food distribution centres – called 'foodbanks' – in order to eat. Two million people in 465 communities across Canada rely on handouts for at least some of their food each month.

Foodbanks are a sour, frustrating experience. 'You take what they give you,' says Dave, an unemployed young volunteer, between drags on a cigarette. 'The attitude is: you're getting a free meal, don't complain.'

The Good Food Box is the latest initiative of FoodShare Metro Toronto, a community organization working against hunger. Several years ago the group focused on lobbying the Government for

higher minimum-wage and social-assistance levels. When those efforts failed to pay off, demoralization set in.

'We asked ourselves: isn't there something we can do immediately to make a difference in people's lives?' says FoodShare executive director, Debbie Field.

They found that it was possible to make advances on the hunger issue that couldn't be made on income security. Why not enable poor people to stretch their food dollars further?

Inspired economy

Learning about self-help projects such as Peru's vast community-kitchen movement, and about the impact of hundreds of thousands of women cooking together, inspired new strategies. Inspiration also came from bulk-purchase consumer movements in countries like India and South Korea.

Hence the Good Food Box, a way in which low-income people working together can bypass the capitalist food system, says Field, and develop alternatives they control themselves. 'We're asking people to boycott the dominant food industry, an industry based on food as a commodity.'

The program combines the economies of scale involved in bulk purchasing with extensive community involvement. Paid staff buy fruit and vegetables from wholesalers and, where possible, direct from farmers. As much Ontario produce is

It's cheap, it's fresh and it benefits both buyer and seller.

Murray MacAdam

checks out a special package.

included as possible, to support local farmers. The food is then delivered to public-housing projects, community centres and other drop-off points.

Paying for food avoids the stigma felt when going to foodbanks. 'The bottom line is, people are paying for what they get,' says Errin Stone, a volunteer since the program began. 'It's not a charity, it's a business.' Stone is unemployed but hopes that his hands-on experience in ordering food, coordinating volunteers and pricing will pay off through a future career in the food industry. Without its wave of volunteers, most of them women, the Good Food Box simply would not happen.

The enthusiasm has already spread beyond Toronto. In the rich agricultural area of Niagara, south-west of Toronto, another group of volunteers pack food boxes one morning at a housing co-operative in the city of St Catharines. Sales have soared from 205 boxes last July to over 700 in December. The program is sponsored by a local non-profit housing agency.

'When I get to the end of the month we're down to Kraft Dinner – I call it Crap Dinner: hot dogs, stuff that's not expensive,' says Rene Fisher from Welland, who is a mother of four. 'By the end of the month we're out of everything. I buy a bag of oranges and they're gone in no time. This stuff [the Food Box] is fresh, economical and it's good for you.'

The program also creates some work for people who desperately need it. Packing the boxes in the town of Fort Eire meant a few hours of work for some people on social assistance just before Christmas. 'You should have seen the excitement on their faces when they were paid,' comments promoter Joan Stewart. 'You would have thought you'd given them a million dollars.'

The Good Food Box is about much more than cheap, healthy food. For many poor people food is a cause of stress, since you

Here's to health! Mary Lou Morgan and Errin Stone with the week's best budget buy.



MURRAY MACADAM