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RESEARCH PAPER



# Take the money and run: how food banks became complicit with Walmart Canada's hunger producing employment practices

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## ABSTRACT

For decades critics have identified Walmart Canada's employment practices – characterized by inadequate wages with few benefits – as contributing to household food insecurity (HFI). Walmart Canada also opposes unionization drives which would result in higher wages and benefits through the collective bargaining process. In a remarkable example of image management, Walmart Canada now brands itself as an important ally in reducing the HFI its employment and anti-union practices create by entering a partnership with the major food bank association in Canada, Food Banks Canada (FBC). We carry out a critical case study of this partnership that examines the contradictions between Walmart's operating culture and FBC's goal of reducing HFI. We conclude that by entering into a partnership with Walmart Canada and ignoring its own policy documents describing how low-paid work and inadequate benefits create HFI, FBC has become complicit in maintaining the structures and processes that create and perpetuate the HFI that threatens Canadians' health. We then specify the implications these developments have for addressing HFI and the inequitable distribution of other social determinants of health.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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Food banks; corporate hegemony; corporate social responsibility; Walmart Canada

Though the rich of this earth find no difficulty in creating misery, they can't bear to see it.

– Bertolt Brecht, *The Threepenny Opera*

## Introduction

Low-paid employment and household food insecurity (HFI) are not isolated phenomena in Canada. Among the 25 Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) nations for which data is available, Canada ranks 4th highest (19.4%) in its proportion of workers earning less than two-thirds of national median earnings and its rate of HFI is 12.7% (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2019c; Tarasuk & Mitchell, 2020). Walmart Canada has for decades been one of the most widely cited employers fitting the low pay profile (Gondziola, 2005; Meunier, 2019b).

Googling the keywords 'food insecurity' and 'Walmart Canada' now shows Walmart Canada as the champion of a *Fight Hunger – Spark Change* campaign through its partnership with Canada's flagship food bank association, Food Banks Canada (FBC) (Food Banks Canada, 2019a). To gain further insight into the implications of this partnership for addressing HFI as well as other social issues related to the

distribution of economic and social resources, we carry out a critical case study examining the apparent inherent contradictions in the Walmart Canada and FBC partnership (Harvey, 1990).

Employing Harvey's (1990) concept of critical social research, we uncover the dominant social structures – and the social relations that result from them – behind the Walmart – FBC partnership to answer the following questions: (1) How did Walmart Canada go from HFI villain to hero?; (2) What are the implications of these partnerships for addressing HFI in Canada?; and (3) What lessons can be drawn for those working in similar areas of human need? By bringing together the academic and grey literature on Walmart Canada's employment practices and placing these against FBC's mission of reducing HFI, we identify how this partnership illustrates (a) the perils of such partnerships; (b) the impact of corporate hegemony on CSOs' practices; and (c) the use of corporate social responsibility as a smokescreen for problematic corporate practices.

## Background

### *Household food insecurity in Canada*

Food security is a human right enshrined in United Nations (UN) declarations of which Canada is a signatory (Riches, 2018; United Nations, 1966). HFI describes the inability of people to acquire food in socially acceptable ways. Since HFI contributes to adverse health outcomes, it is an important social determinant of health (Tarasuk, 2016). The 2017–18 Canadian Community Health Survey found 12.7% of Canadian households experience some form of HFI (Tarasuk & Mitchell, 2020). Not surprisingly, Canada has been the target of ongoing rebukes by the UN for its failure to address HFI (McCormack, 2006; De Schutter, 2014). The most recent UN Rapporteur's Report on Hunger in Canada described how income gaps have widened in Canada such that a significant proportion of Canadians cannot afford to purchase food (De Schutter, 2014).

### *Causes of household food insecurity*

HFI is best understood within the context of growing social inequalities associated with reorganization of the labour market and retrenchment of the Canadian welfare state dating from the 1980s (Mendly-Zambo & Raphael, 2018). As early as 1986, the striking growth of food banks in Canada was recognized as a result of the failure of minimum wages to keep up with inflation as well as the decay of the Canadian social safety net (Riches, 2018). Since then HFI has further increased due to growing inequalities in income and wealth (Riches, 2018).

Statistics Canada's 2017–18 Canadian Community Health Survey finds two-thirds (65%) of food-insecure households report employment wages as their main source of income and HFI is especially prevalent among the low waged (Tarasuk & Mitchell, 2020). As noted earlier, Canada has one of the highest low wage rates (wages <67% of median income) amongst OECD nations (OECD, 2019c) and in 1998, 5.2% of Canadians earned minimum wages – which placed full-time workers below the <50% median income poverty line (Dionne-Simard & Miller, 2019). By 2018, this percentage had doubled to 10.4%. Behind these figures are the low rates of union membership and collective bargaining coverage (32%) embedded within an employment environment with no sectoral or cross-sectoral wage bargaining (OECD, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c). The lobbying efforts of corporate Canada to reduce government spending have also been blamed for these developments (Langille, 2016).

Low waged employment provides few if any benefits (Barnes et al., 2015). Low waged workers in the province of Ontario, for example, are unlikely to have medical benefits (e.g. prescription drug coverage), dental benefits, vision care, and pension plans; their allocating of funds for these necessities increases their probability of experiencing HFI.

## Responses to food insecurity

Various responses to HFI in Canada include providing food insecure individuals with counseling and education to encourage the consumption of healthier foods and stretch their financial resources, as well as the charitable provision of food (Mendly-Zambo & Raphael, 2018). Food banks are by far the most common charitable response to HFI (Riches, 2018).

Food banks, however, are an ineffective means of reducing HFI as less than 25% of HFI Canadians receive food from food banks (Riches, 2018). Food bank drives and the attention they elicit from the media imply HFI is being managed, thereby reducing calls for public policy responses to deal with the inequitable distribution of resources, the ultimate source of HFI (Riches, 2018). Despite the belief in the merit of such charitable institutions among food bank workers and volunteers, many food bank clients experience stigma and shame (Vahabi & Damba, 2013). Food security advocates increasingly deny their value in reducing HFI and some call for them to be phased out as they prop up a broken system (Ontario Dietitians in Public Health, 2015; Power, 2011).

Instead of charitable giving, Mendly-Zambo and Raphael (2018) call for a restructuring of societal power relations to address the lack of income, affordable housing, and secure employment with benefits that drive HFI. This directs attention to how companies like Walmart Canada's employment practices, anti-union activities and partnership with FBC represents an assertion of corporate power that needs to be curbed (Mendly-Zambo & Raphael, 2018). In this view, Walmart Canada is not part of the solution to HFI, but part of the problem.

## Methodology

In this paper, we conduct a critical case study, informed by a critical social research perspective, of the *Fight Hunger – Spark Change* partnership between FBC and Walmart Canada, to examine the inherent contradictions engendered by this partnership. Harvey (1990) describes critical social research as situating social phenomena within the larger dominant social structures perpetuated and maintained through political and economic power and legitimated through ideological messaging. As discussed by Harvey (1990), the case study researcher 'deliberately selects, for detailed empirical analysis, a case that provides a specific focus for analysis of myth or contradiction' (p. 153). In this case, a document analysis of annual FBC *HungerCount* reports from 2010–19 which document food bank use, demographics of food bank users, and provides recommendations for reducing HFI revealed FBC's understanding of the causes of HFI and its proposed solutions. Material, including press-releases and websites related to the *Fight Hunger – Spark Change* partnership between FBC and Walmart Canada, were also examined.

We then used Google Scholar™ to identify academic-related analyses of Walmart's employment practices and their effects and the literatures on corporate hegemony, corporate and civil society organization (CSO) partnerships, and corporate social responsibility. Martín-Martín et al. (2018) show Google Scholar™ 'finds significantly more citations than the WoS Core Collection and Scopus across all subject areas' (p. 1175). Finally, we used Google™ to identify grey literature on Walmart Canada's employment practices and their effects. We then placed what we found against FBC's mission of reducing HFI.

## Findings

### Food Banks Canada

FBC describes itself as 'a national charitable organization dedicated to helping Canadians living with food insecurity' (Food Banks Canada, 2021b). It provides support to a vast network of provincial associations, affiliate food banks, and food agencies. While it expresses a concern with 'reducing the need for food banks' (Food Banks Canada, 2021b), most of its activities involve fund-raising to assist in the collection and distribution of food.

Its 2010 *HungerCount* stated: 'Low income is the root of the problem', a theme reiterated over the past decade of *HungerCount* reports (see the supplementary online Appendix). Poor quality employment is also consistently stated as a source of HFI. The 2012 *HungerCount* report states: 'Blue-collar jobs accessible to people with low levels of education have steadily disappeared, replaced to a large degree by service sector jobs that are more likely to be part-time, temporary, low-paid, and with few non-wage benefits'. The 2014 report states: 'Canada has a booming low-wage economy, thanks in part to a confounding, ongoing loss of well-paying blue-collar jobs'.

### **Walmart Canada**

For decades Walmart Canada has been cited for its low-wage policy and lack of benefits (Gondziola, 2005; Meunier, 2019a, 2019b). In addition to its low-wage policy, Walmart Canada has been cited for unfair labour practices in relation to its anti-union activities (CBC News, 2014; Meunier, 2019b). It actively resists unionization which would raise employees' wages and improve benefits through the collective bargaining process. In 2014 the Supreme Court of Canada sided with the union in finding that Walmart Canada violated Quebec labour law when it closed a store in Jonquière, Quebec after workers voted to unionize (CBC News, 2014). Walmart Canada's aggressive anti-union activities are ongoing (Corporate Research Project, 2020; Meunier, 2019a).

Economists use the term negative externalities to refer to negative impacts that result from economic transactions (Windsor, 2006). Externalities arising from Walmart Canada's operations, i.e. the adverse social, economic, or environmental burdens its transactions create, are borne by others (Unerman et al., 2018).

Walmart's entrance into the USA food retail sector in 1988 triggered immediate and long-lasting changes in food distribution (Howard, 2016; Olson, 2014). Walmart USA applied its know-how to developing supply chains and strategies to the food retail sector that put existing supermarkets on the defensive. In response – facilitated by recently relaxed antitrust laws – supermarket chains rapidly acquired more stores such that concentration in the USA food retail sector skyrocketed. Research of this type is rare in Canada.

Today, nearly every part of the food system is controlled by a small handful of large corporations (Howard, 2016; Magdoff, 2012) and the Canadian food retail sector is no exception. Only three companies: Loblaws Companies Limited, Empire Company Limited and Metro Inc., dominate the market, and together collectively account for 66.2% of retail food sales in Canada (AAFC, 2017; Vincent et al., 2017). Walmart Canada is the 5th largest food retailer holding 6.2% of retail sales in 2017 (Statista, 2019).

Corporate concentration in the food sector has negative impacts on the lives of Canadians, as made evident by a recent bread fixing scandal in which Walmart Canada, as well as other retailers, were implicated in a scheme which raised the price of bagged bread products well above the rate of inflation (Strauss, 2018). This certainly did not lessen the incidence of HFI in Canada.

In the USA, Walmart's entrance into the food retail sector placed downward pressure on wages in the rest of the sector. To stay competitive, grocery stores decreased wages which in turn triggered labour disputes. A notable example was the Safeway strike in 2003 which lasted 19 weeks. Safeway employees lost the dispute and numerous concessions were made including cuts to healthcare and pensions and lower wages for new hires (Azul & Andrews, 2004). Howard (2016) views this as triggering an industry-wide shift from well-paid middle-class wages to the low wages we see today. Lower wages, however, have not translated into lower food prices for consumers as food prices continue to rise while wages remain stagnant (Charlebois et al., 2020). As noted, research of this type is rare in Canada but there is little reason to doubt the relevance of these findings to the Canadian context.

### **The Walmart and Food Banks Canada partnership**

Since 2016, Food Banks Canada (FBC) has partnered with Walmart Canada in a *Fight Hunger – Spark Change* campaign. In 2020, Walmart Canada aimed to raise funds for 15 million meals at an estimated

cost of \$0.33 a meal (Walmart Canada, 2020b). Donations are raised through: (a) cash donations in stores or online; (b) donation of non-perishable food items in stores; and (c) donation of a portion of proceeds to FBC.

In addition, Walmart Canada diverts surplus foods to local food banks to ‘address food waste and food insecurity’ (Food Banks Canada, 2019a). Since 2012, Walmart Canada has donated over 16 million pounds of food to food banks (Walmart Canada, 2020a). Walmart Canada is a member of the National Zero Waste Council (NZWC), an advocate of food diversion (National Zero Waste Council, 2020).

Food security advocates do not see food diversion as addressing the fundamental causes of HFI (McIntyre et al., 2017). Tax incentives to corporations, in addition to not addressing the drivers of HFI, can overwhelm food banks/charities’ operating capacities (Toronto Food Policy Council, 2016). Rather, it disproportionately benefits corporations such as Walmart Canada by allowing avoidance of costly disposal fees (Toronto Food Policy Council, 2016) and boosts their public image (Riches, 2018).

These activities create the illusion HFI is being addressed and obscures the role Walmart Canada and other corporations play in creating HFI. Many full-time Walmart USA employees depend on food stamps (K. Clark, 2014) and organize food drives for co-workers (Gustafson, 2014; Nicks, 2013). Furthermore, Walmart USA directly benefits from the impoverishment of workers; in 2013, nearly 1 in 5 food stamp sales – worth approximately \$13.5 billion USD – occurred at Walmart USA stores (Americans for Tax Fairness, 2014; Simon, 2014). In February 2020, Walmart USA employed 14,541 food stamp recipients across nine states (Sanders, 2020). Walmart USA’s poverty-creating employment practices led to criticism of NBA star LeBron James’ foundation entering a partnership with Walmart USA to fight hunger (Zirin, 2019).

Additional companies which partner and/or contribute to FBC – Loblaws, CIBC, KPMG, Kraft Heinz, Bayer, Nestle, Campbell Company, and Redpath Sugar – are members of the Canadian corporate community which advocates for reduced corporate taxes and a reduced Canadian welfare state (Carroll & Sapinski, 2018). Three of these, Loblaws, CIBC and KPMG, are members of the Business Council of Canada which lobbies for government withdrawal from managing the economic marketplace, reductions in corporate taxes, and retrenchment of the Canadian welfare state (Langille, 2016).

### **Impacts upon FBC statements on HFI**

Examination of *HungerCount* reports from 2010 to 2019 suggests an evolution of policy recommendations from an earlier emphasis on poorly paid employment to now noting failings of Canada’s social safety net. The 2019 *HungerCount* report attributes HFI to a deficient social safety net, as 43.4% of food bank users stated ‘social assistance/benefits too low’ as a reason for visiting the food bank (Food Banks Canada, 2021a). FBC also identifies increasing employment precarity as 19.4% of users give ‘low or delayed wages’ as the reason for food bank use.

While the 2019 report states ‘the root cause of food bank use is, and always has been, related to poverty and low income – and this core issue can only be addressed through government policies’ (p. 29), there are no recommendations in the report to increase wages and provide benefits or reduce worker precarity. Rather, FBC recommends piloting basic income projects, a policy criticized for subsidizing low wage companies like Walmart Canada (J. Clark, 2020). In the USA, federal assistance programs such as food stamps and Medicaid enroll 4.7 and 5.7 million people, respectively, who despite being full-time workers, live in poverty. These include employees of Walmart USA and other companies with wages so low that employees qualify for these programs (McCauley, 2014). In essence, US taxpayers subsidize poverty-level wages paid by companies, a phenomenon Senator Bernie Sanders describes as ‘morally obscene’ (Sanders, 2020).

FBC also recommends the creation of affordable childcare programs, increased support for low-income single adults, rapid implementation of the Canadian Housing Benefit, reducing Northern food insecurity, increasing non-cash benefits to all low-income households, a national pharmacare

program, and converting non-refundable tax credits into refundable ones (Food Banks Canada, 2019b). None of these recommendations question the wage levels and benefits provided by Walmart Canada and other companies, nor say anything about how unionization of workplaces and collective bargaining would reduce HFI among workers. Corporate opposition to these recommended social programs goes unmentioned.

## Discussion

### *The perils of partnership*

Recent scholarship has examined problematic aspects of partnerships between civil society organizations (CSOs) and corporations. Primarily focused on commodities such as sugar-rich food and beverages, tobacco, and alcohol, cash-starved CSOs enter into agreements by which corporations that produce these commodities come to be seen as supporters of the public's health.

Marks (2019) outlines numerous perils of corporate and public partnerships which are especially relevant to the FBC and its Walmart Canada – and other corporate – partnerships: agenda distortion, reciprocity, and lack of integrity. Agenda distortion occurs when a CSO shifts its mission and activities to conform to the perceived exigencies of corporate partners. Reciprocity is the process by which the CSO takes measures to support the partner, even though such activities may go against its expressed mission. Finally, a lack of integrity on the part of the CSO in such a partnership threatens the CSO's ability to influence public policy as these partnerships can take measures off the table that would promote the common good. Marks' (2019) take on the effects of these partnership is telling:

When a civil society organization (CSO) has close relations with one or more corporations or trade associations and, in particular, when it receives funding from such entities, the CSO is likely to be influenced by that interaction and, in turn, to exercise influence on industry's behalf. The CSO may do this unwittingly as a result of subtle reciprocity. The organization's staff may not realize that they are exercising self-censorship, and modifying or shaping their views to avoid undermining the short-term commercial interests of an industry sponsor. CSOs may unintentionally serve as proxies for industry or at the very least provide them with "credibility enhancement". (p. 72)

We can see how these issues arise in relation to the FBC and Walmart Canada partnership. We detect a shift in public FBC communications away from identifying low wages and lack of benefits as causes of HFI, towards a call for an unlikely-to-be-implemented basic income for Canadians. In contrast, we do not see FBC calling for support of labour movement efforts to unionize Walmart's low paying employees nor calling for increases in their wages, benefits, and Walmart's corporate taxes to provide revenues for an enhanced social safety net.

One response to the problem of partnerships is to encourage transparency. Mialon et al. (2020) reviewed existing means of monitoring corporate influences upon public health authorities regarding commodities rather than broader CSO partnerships. There are few instances of outright bans of such partnerships and codes of conduct are uncommon. Indeed, Goldberg (2019) and Marks (2020) do not see transparency as a solution to the conflicts inherent in corporate – CSO partnerships, arguing such efforts may crowd out solutions, such as banning these partnerships outright, which are more likely to be effective.

### *Corporate hegemony over CSOs*

Gramsci's (2000) concept of cultural hegemony, whereby the ideas and values of the ruling classes – in this case, the corporate sector in the creature of Walmart Canada – come to be imposed upon and then accepted by those being dominated, has much to offer in explaining Walmart Canada's and other corporations' partnerships with FBC. As described by Cole: 'The term refers to the ability of a group of people to hold power over social institutions, and thus, to strongly influence the everyday thoughts, expectations, and behaviour of the rest of society by directing the normative ideas, values,

and beliefs that become the dominant worldview of a society' (Cole, 2017). Through such cultural hegemony, Walmart Canada is now seen as part of the solution to HFI.

Raphael et al. (2019) linked corporate influence with disease associations' discourses of chronic disease which eschewed mention of living and working conditions as causes of disease in favor of individual behavioural choices. Boards of Directors of Heart and Stroke Canada and Diabetes Canada are dominated by the corporate sector. This is the same corporate sector that through their lobbying activities create the conditions that drive the incidence of chronic disease: economic and social insecurity brought on by a weakened welfare state and minimizing of government management of the employment market.

Gürcan (2015) labels these interactions between corporate actors and the non-profit sector as the 'non-profit corporate complex'. This complex is a system of relationships between states, the ruling classes, and organizations, including non-profit organizations, which fosters relations of domination, exerts control over public discourse, manufactures consent, and promotes capitalist ideals. This process is nakedly exposed as Walmart Canada – whose employment practices create HFI – positions itself as contributing to the solution of HFI through its FBC partnership.

Walmart is not the only corporation in partnership with FBC to rebrand their image. Loblaws, the grocery chain controlled by billionaire Galen Weston Jr., has been cited for rescinding its pandemic bonus of \$2/hour even as its profits soared (UNIFOR, 2020). In 2012, owner Galen Weston Sr. unleashed an aggressive and successful anti-union campaign when workers at its Holt Renfrew stores attempted to unionize (Abdelbaki, 2020). More recently, Loblaws lobbied against raising the federal minimum wage to \$15 an hour (Abdelbaki, 2020). While it should not be surprising that these corporations would want to divert attention from their HFI-creating employment practices, FBC's complicity with this process is startling.

### ***Corporate social responsibility as smoke screen***

One school of thought – most famously framed by Friedman (1962) – holds that the only responsibility of corporations is to maximize profits while avoiding legal sanction (Baden, 2016). This depicts them as amoral social actors, interested in and defined by self-protection and fiscal growth.

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) refers to a company providing benefits to stakeholders; however these stakeholders may be defined (Somerville & Wood, 2012). These stakeholder approaches to CSR consider how a company makes its products and offers its services and whether it brings about some tangible good in a voluntary – as opposed to a legally mandated – way (Ward, 2008). Carroll (1979) proposed that CSR priorities could be arranged hierarchically, with economic responsibility out-ranking legal and ethical responsibilities, a stance which others (Baden, 2016) suggest must change to accommodate the increased power of business in society since the 1970s. Baden (2016) suggests the following order of priority: (1) ethical responsibilities; (2) legal responsibilities; (3) economic responsibilities; and (4) philanthropic responsibilities. In this scheme, ethical responsibilities are defined as follows:

... In order for business to have the license to operate and to be trusted with the production and allocation of scarce natural resources and inherently valuable human resources, it needs to first and foremost accept its ethical responsibility to do no harm and conform to society's ethical norms and expectations. (Baden, 2016, p. 11)

This wider definition of CSR argues companies' activities should address the wider public good, even if profits are reduced (Parsons, 2016). Companies should move beyond their legal and fiscal duties to their immediate stakeholders and apply the ethical principle of 'do no harm'. Parsons (2016) argues CSR should be a core value of business ethics underpinning all business and public relations.

An extension of this view sees companies attempting not only to avoid doing harm (acquiring a social 'conscience' in carrying out their business) but providing social goods in ways not immediately related to their core functions. This can be equated with the ethical principle of beneficence.



This involves not just being aware of their civic and ethical responsibilities, but devoting some company resources (labour, capital, product or service donation or targeted price reduction) to benefit those not regarded as stakeholders in the company, i.e. providing for the wider good.

Baden (2016, p. 11) gives philanthropic responsibilities the lowest priority in her CSP pyramid. CSR is most commonly expressed by companies 'giving to charity' in the form of monetary donation (often raised explicitly by company stakeholders themselves) or donating goods or services. This is not driven entirely by altruism, though individuals carrying out these CSR activities may well be acting out of a genuine willingness to help others. Increased sales, reduced costs, tax incentives, increased customer loyalty and, critically in the case of Walmart Canada, enhanced image and reputation are all benefits of CSR. By being seen to do good, in a way that does not directly increase profits, companies benefit from CSR.

Walmart Canada's working with FBC, when judged in isolation, meets the definition of CSR, a company voluntarily addressing a public good. As a large company giving away funds and products at a financial loss and encouraging customers to contribute to the wider community by easing hunger, its reputation is enhanced.

But to stand up as an ethically sound principle, CSR needs to encompass all of a company's activities. On this score, Walmart Canada's ethical shortcomings overshadow their philanthropic activities. Walmart Canada shows public largesse by helping the hungry on one hand while ignoring or neglecting the plight of its own employees and others on a non-trivial scale, and which is within the ability of a company with revenue in the billions of dollars to address. Outward beneficence is trumped by internal maleficence.

Similarly, its contribution to food banks, when placed against its history of anti-union activities and its effects upon their own workers and other workers' well-being, is trivial. As noted above, whatever contribution it and other companies make to food banks does little to deal with HFI, as only a small minority of the household food insecure use these resources. These efforts also hamper public policy approaches to reducing HFI by giving the impression HFI is being managed. Its anti-union activities have a far greater impact upon HFI, and not for the good. Additionally, Walmart Canada and other similar corporations – through partnerships with CSOs such as FBC – go from villains to saviors, making dealing with other social determinants of health such as employment security and working conditions more difficult. Analyses of the 'commercial determinants of health' drive home these points (Kickbusch et al., 2016; McKee and Stuckler, 2018).

For FBC, the partnership with Walmart Canada and other corporations raises an important ethical question: Should a CSO supposedly committed to reducing HFI be engaged in image enhancement with a company whose employment practices not only create HFI amongst its own employees but also among others through its encouraging of anti-union and benefit-reducing public policies? How do FBC's partnerships with a corporate sector that calls for reducing benefits and supports for the most vulnerable stack up against FBC's commitments to reduce HFI?

Marks' (2019) argument that the drive by corporations and public health agencies to work in reciprocal arrangements to achieve 'common good' is likely to undermine the well-being of third parties seems relevant in relation to the vulnerable communities FBC is obliged to protect. Even by the 'stakeholder model' (Somerville & Wood, 2012), this leaves Walmart Canada far short of achieving CSR, since employees are universally regarded as stakeholders. By these broader definitions of CSR definite harm is being done. None of this is illegal, nor does it disparage Walmart Canada's products or deny Walmart Canada's contributions totaling millions of dollars. But it does raise serious questions about the legitimacy of this instance of CSR and how it has become a smokescreen to hide problematic business practices. Philanthropic responsibility fails to make up for the shortcomings in ethical responsibility.

## **Future of food banks in Canada**

Issues of low income and poverty as determinants of HFI are embedded within a general societal failure to provide Canadians with the means of obtaining health. Walmart Canada's employment

practices and FBC's reliance upon Walmart Canada and other corporations are part of a larger system which values profit ('the economy') above all else (Freudenberg, 2021). In many jurisdictions, the lack of regulations to ensure affordable housing, transportation and failure to oppose trends such as gentrification accentuates HFI. It is not only FBC who is complicit with Walmart Canada, but also governing authorities at all levels.

We agree with calls to close food bank (Ontario Dieticians in Public Health, 2015; Power, 2011), an act which would force governing authorities to address HFI. In the short-term this could take the form of food subsidies to the food insecure. In the longer term, HFI would be addressed by moving beyond research and advocacy limited to HFI, to mobilizing the public to demand governmental action to equitably distribute economic and social resources, the lack of which, for many, drives HFI. This would require building political and social movements to challenge the power of the corporate and business sector and, through unionization of workplaces, increase wages and benefits, and through advocacy, provide benefits such as childcare, tuition credits, and family bonuses common to many wealthy nations. More progressive tax structures, which would increase taxes for profitable corporations such as Walmart Canada, would provide the means of accomplishing these broader HFI-reducing public policies.

## Conclusion

It is one thing for well-meaning people such as those associated with FBC to offer food banks as a means of managing HFI. It is quite another to become complicit in maintaining HFI by honoring those whose employment practices create it. Not only do Walmart Canada's and other companies' employment practices create HFI, their anti-union activities block an effective means of reducing HFI: unionization of workplaces and implementation of collective bargaining. Their lobbying for further retrenchment of the Canadian welfare state also contributes to HFI. FBC and the food banks that have embraced Walmart Canada as a partner should immediately cease these relationships. Instead, FBC and its affiliated food banks should highlight how unjust and unfair employment creates HFI and call for major reform of the employment market as a means of reducing HFI in Canada. They should also resist the role that corporate lobbying plays in maintaining low wages and poverty-inducing social assistance levels. Embracing corporations and polishing their images is not a solution to HFI in Canada.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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