

Practitioner Vignette: Food Justice in a Global Context

by Rebecca L. Farnum and Maya Terro

Right now, there is enough food in the world to make sure that every single person on the planet gets the food they need to lead a healthy life. As a global community, we are food blessed. Hunger is not an environmental reality. It is a societal choice. Social and political issues – poverty, gender inequality, and racism, to name but a few – create barriers to food access and security.

Around the world, food activists campaign for the human right to food and against large corporations threatening local food production and distribution systems. We work toward an understanding of hunger and nutrition that includes attention to health, culture, and sustainability, not merely basic calorie counts. We consider the impact of our eating on our neighbors, human and non-human alike. And we seek to understand how our local food issues intersect with wider global systems of access, power, and control.

There are any number of lenses through which food justice can be viewed. Self-determination and governance, workers' rights, environmental sustainability, health, animal rights, transportation...so many issues impact and are impacted by food systems.

For Maya Terro, a Lebanese activist interested in corporate social responsibility, sustainability, and development, the lens is waste. 30% of all the food produced globally is wasted and ends up being thrown away each year. This food waste is equal to three times the amount of food needed to feed the 890 million persons suffering from malnutrition. In Lebanon alone, millions of tons of good food are thrown away every year.

Perplexed by the paradox of so many people going hungry surrounded by so much wasted food, Maya became a food activist. In 2012, she co-founded FoodBlessed, a local hunger relief initiative that works with businesses and civil society to reduce the number of people going hungry in Lebanon through mindfulness about food use. FoodBlessed is a community-based and volunteer-driven nonprofit organization that links donors with food surplus get that excess to food insecure beneficiaries while simultaneously addressing and spreading awareness on food waste and food rescue. We give restaurants and catering agencies practical tips for cutting down on their food waste generation and individuals the opportunity to serve food to those in need through volunteering. In fewer than four years, we have successfully distributed more than 270,000 meals that were prepared by community cookouts, from surplus food rescued from events, and/or from surplus vegetables and fruits salvaged from dumpsters and local markets. Some 700 "Hunger Heroes" have found community and food education while volunteering with us.

FoodBlessed is fundamentally a local, community-based organization. We are bottom-up, volunteer-driven, self-funded. This is important to us: we believe that community-based organizations are more effective in addressing food justice than larger charitable organizations. Local groups understand on-the-ground nuances better. We insure sustainability by directly involving our donor and beneficiary communities at all stages of our work – planning, implementing, and evaluating programming. And our mission is primarily local. We work in Beka'a and Akkar, neighborhoods with some of the highest poverty rates in Lebanon, to directly alleviate hunger.

But we also know that our work – and the forces that make our work necessary – are global. We do not work in a vacuum. FoodBlessed will not succeed in its mission of zero food waste and zero food insecurity without global food justice. Local food justice is not possible in global systems of injustice and unsustainability. As local activists, then, we must engage with and address global issues.

In Lebanon, food justice has been fundamentally affected by global events. Most obviously, the impacts of the Syrian war have put additional pressures on the environmental and economic resources of the region. Lebanon continues to host the highest percentage of Syrian refugees in the world. Today, 1 in 5 people living in Lebanon is Syrian. Thousands of people are barely surviving with resources like jobs, food, and shelter growing increasingly scarce under pressure. Around 300,000 Lebanese citizens are unable to meet their most basic needs, including food. The poor are heavily concentrated among the unemployed and unskilled workers, especially in agriculture and construction sectors. And most of the country's growing population of 1.6 million Syrian refugees have little access to resources and few employment opportunities.

Lebanon's need for food – and food aid – is increasing. This is happening at the same time that global food prices are also on the rise. For us at FoodBlessed, this reinforces the need to minimize food waste and maximize the resources we have.

Of course, our local actions also impact global issues. Food waste has drastic environmental impacts. In 2013, the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organisation released the first study analyzing the global environmental impacts of food waste. *Food Wastage Footprint: Impacts on Natural Resources* found that the 1.3 billion tons of food waste add 3.3 billion tons of greenhouse gases to the planet's atmosphere each year. This, in turn, drives climate change, which threatens food justice around the world. And the negative cycle goes on – or is disrupted by initiatives like FoodBlessed's.

We are also global in our community. FoodBlessed is proud to engage in informal people-to-people diplomacy. Food has an amazing power to bring people together to a common table. At FoodBlessed, individuals from different countries, religions, ethnicities, and backgrounds come together. Eating, working, and talking together helps to reduce stereotypes and brings people together across cultural, national, and religious tensions. This is true between Syrian refugee and local Lebanese populations, across the many ethnic and religious divides of Lebanese societies, and via the organization's numerous international volunteers. International Hunger Heroes and non-Lebanese beneficiaries learn how to cook local dishes and are taught Lebanese gestures, greetings, and sayings. And, of course, this is a two-way street. International visitors have also shared their own favorite dishes from home with the FoodBlessed community and taught bits of their own language. Through this exchange, our work enhances intercultural understanding locally and internationally.

Lastly, doing food justice in a global context means sharing and learning from best practice. FoodBlessed recently helped to draft the “Lebanese Food Donation Law”, a response to the need to manage food donation transactions in our country. Like America's Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Food Donation Act, the Lebanese Food Donation law provides liability protection to good faith donors except in cases of gross negligence or intentional misconduct. This work was inspired and guided by international study and partners.

Too frequently, food justice efforts become isolated. It is easy to become so discouraged by the injustice of large corporations and global power structures that we disengage. But the work we do as food justice activists is both inherently local and inextricably global. Food justice work is *always* within a global context, whether we explicitly acknowledge it or not.

The refugee crisis, climate change, and hunger are major problems for FoodBlessed, for Lebanon, and for the world. Global forces make our work both harder and more important. But they can also provide solutions and tools for action, as we learn from each other, join in solidarity, and share resources. Together, we can tackle local issues of food injustice for the global advancement of universal justice.

About the Authors:

Maya Terro, Co-Founder of FoodBlessed, is a Lebanese civil society activist. Maya graduated with a BS in Biology (premed) and a Masters of Public Health (M.P.H.) from the American University of Beirut. She also holds an M.A. (Hons) in Development Economics and International Co-operation from the University of Rome II at Tor Vergata. Terro currently advocates full-time for food justice in Lebanon and around the world, engaging in direct action through FoodBlessed as well as a variety of educational and systemic initiatives aimed at reducing food waste and improving access.

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