

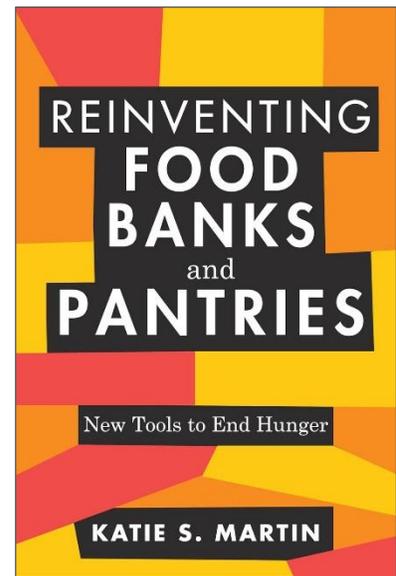
What role can food banks play in addressing the root causes of food insecurity?

Book review by

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Review of *Reinventing Food Banks and Pantries: New Tools to End Hunger*, by Katie S. Martin. (2021). Published by Island Press. Available as paperback, Kindle, audiobook, and audio CD; 280 pages. Publisher's website: <https://islandpress.org/books/reinventing-food-banks-and-pantries>



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Charity has not been shown to successfully aid our most vulnerable populations, so we must critically consider how we treat our vulnerable people and how best to assist them. *Reinventing Food Banks and Pantries: New Tools to End Hunger* by Katie Martin does this by guiding food pantry employees, volunteers, and funders across the United States on how to improve the experience of food assistance

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for their guests. She has decades of experience working in the charitable food system and has partnered with food banks and food pantries across the country to improve their impacts. Martin is the executive director of the Foodshare Institute for Hunger Research and Solutions. She provides novel examples from her work to show what reinventing food banks and pantries can look like.

Martin sets the stage by juxtaposing the goals of emergency food aid with the goals of reducing widespread food insecurity. While the charitable food system is built on addressing emergency food access, the current food insecurity in the U.S. is not an emergency; it is embedded in our society. Due to these competing priorities, Martin asserts, "The focus of this national network has been, and con-

tinues to be, to tackle hunger by providing more food to more people. ... Yet if this tactic were successful, we would have solved the problem of hunger a long time ago. ... We [do not] have such pervasive food insecurity because we do not have enough food” (p. 4). Consequently, these programs are built and measured around the goal of feeding the hungry. When food banks measure success through pounds of food donated, it encourages them to keep customers rather than address the root causes of food insecurity. A lost customer is not a success story of someone getting back on their feet but instead an indication of less food donated.

Martin rightfully criticizes the transactional focus of food banks and pantries and urges us to replace that with deeper, more holistic involvement with the community. She outlines what she describes as a ‘menu’ of actions a food bank or pantry can choose from to be more impactful, backing these changes with examples and data. Each chapter delves into new ways food pantries can increase their capacity, humanize their guests with more agency, and move from measuring outputs to measuring outcomes.

The solutions proposed vary in difficulty and cover a range of challenges that food banks and pantries face, specifically centering on guest experience, which has been devastatingly omitted from previous food bank and pantry design. These solutions also require reallocating resources: time, money, employees, space, etc. Martin questions the ‘scarcity mentality’ many charitable food organizations use to justify their stagnation. However, the book could have articulated in more depth how food banks and food pantries can access support. For example, the book recommends improving and shifting to more qualitative reporting guidelines but lacks specifics about finding the funding and resources to conduct more intensive reporting. Program monitoring is notoriously difficult to fund and requires additional staff and guest effort.

If food banks implemented some of the suggestions provided, funders, volunteers, and staff

could withdraw support, as noted in the book. For many food pantries, this would not just be an unfortunate loss, but would critically alter the way they do business. Due to the focus on building capacity, the book fails to acknowledge the genuine deficiencies in capacity encountered by numerous charitable food establishments that could halt their progress.

A central assumption guiding this book is the notion that it is possible to reinvent food aid within the charitable food network. Martin recognizes the challenges with food aid in the U.S., but the solutions proposed do not critique the underlying power dynamics of food banks that perpetuate the status quo. Martin does not consider the sources of donations and funding, nor does she outline a path to sunset food banks and pantries if they are no longer required.

Through approachable language and a plethora of examples, this book is accessible to any reader. Still, the people who would benefit most from reading it are food bank staff, funders, and volunteers who have the power to change the way their organization is set up. As new, younger people join food bank and pantry staff, they will likely be the ones pushing for these changes but may lack the power to incorporate them. The book would have benefitted from a more robust analysis outlining how to win leadership buy-in if they are not initially on board.

Martin does an excellent job of critically evaluating how food banks and pantries should change the way they do business. These techniques, in particular, will benefit those experiencing food insecurity by humanizing them and offering them a pathway out of poverty. Though Martin’s optimism is inspiring, these changes will not necessarily transform the ways we as a society treat our community members. Regardless, this book is a good start to addressing the root causes of food insecurity within our current food aid structure. I urge anyone working within food banks or food pantries to read *Reinventing Food Banks and Pantries: New Tools to End Hunger* and take inspiration from the stories of what food aid could be. 