

Edible Justice: Exploring Cultural Inclusivity, Medicinal Eating, and Access in Contemporary Food Systems.

A Thesis

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Abstract

As the global push for food security continues, food advocates increasingly look towards justice scholars for insights into the multiple facets of oppression that reinstate food insecurity as one of the most widespread injustices today's contemporary audiences face. Alternative food systems spring up in response to the interdisciplinary harm caused by the current capitalist food regime, though still embedded in ideologies of whiteness, settler-colonialism, and neoliberalism. This paper explores the effects of pervasive whiteness as an embedded statute of alternative food systems and how cultural inclusion (or lack there of) shows up in alternative and emergency food access spaces like food banks and food rescues, contributing to the maintenance of whiteness and therefor discounting medicinal eating as a traditional culinary practice of the non-Western world. This thesis advocates for the implementation of tangible cultural inclusion like spices and universal staples (rice, teas, etc..) within alternative food access points to better cater to racial and ethnic minorities, preserving cultural normalcy in high stigma environments like food banks/rescues.

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Introduction

Globally as many as 783 million people—more than the population of the E.U. and U.S. combined—suffer from hunger (AAH). While feeding many people, the current capitalist food system is built on corporate control that exacerbates economic disparities between big business and working-class laborers, leading to difficulties in accessing food around the world. Moreover,

the current food system harms the planet that millions of farmers rely on to feed themselves and their communities. Issues include large-scale monocultures and mechanization requiring intensive water use, fostering biodiversity loss, increasing greenhouse gases, erosion of soil, and continued use of agrochemicals and GMO's.

The food justice movement aims to address many problems in the food system. Whether through food cooperatives, fair trade, or urban agriculture, food justice activists try to increase healthy food access while centering questions of race and class. However, actualizing such efforts can be challenging given the prevalence of whiteness in alternative food movement spaces, that while however common, do not always come from a food justice perspective (Alkon, 2010, p. 937). Food justice activists call attention to these oversights in dominant alternative food movement spaces to better support the marginalized who are often scraping the bottom of the capitalistic barrel when it comes to access. The strain between the goals of the food justice movement and the constraints of dominant alternative food spaces is reflected in my own relationship with food, one molded by both privilege and the confrontation of racial and socioeconomic barriers within these systems.

Based on my own food consumption experiences and reading relevant academic literature, this thesis examines the racial and socioeconomic barriers to culturally reliable, nutritional, and medicinal foods within the context of alternative food systems. My (privileged) perspective on food systems began to expand as I moved through university, learning both in the classroom and in the grocery store, the toll that foods systems put on the consumer. As a black, queer, woman, it came as no surprise that moving away from home would present me with experiences outside of my racial and social wheelhouse. What did surprise me, however, was my newly realized relationship with food. Having grown up in a mixed-race household, I now

recognize that my culinary background is broad and assorted. My mother, a Ugandan immigrant, raised my two sisters and I on African cooking—posho, chapati, beef stew, and munanasi. We would go to the African depo and get plantain, ox tail, cassava, and palm oil to make a dinner that would last the whole week. In contrast, my father, born and raised in Rutland, Vermont, showed us the joys of McDonald’s ice cream cones and canned cranberry sauce on Thanksgiving. He came from an All-American family that relied mostly on ultra-processed, high efficiency foods (fast-food, canned goods, delivery, etc.). As a student at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI), relying for the first time on myself, I found I was pushed to consume a Standard American Diet (SAD), based on what was most normalized and attainable. My focus was fueled by exposure to social justice coursework and food justice initiatives, further prompting me to critically appraise local food access points both in and out of the dominant food system that had unreliably provided accessible and healthy foods to people like me.

Literature Review

Dietary Problems in the Food System

Dominant food systems hinder the health of Americans. The Standard American Diet demotes food’s connection to medicine that influences many Eastern and African diets. SAD “consists of excess sodium, saturated fat, refined grains, and calories from solid fats and added sugars...Americans eat less vegetables, fruits, whole grains, dairy products, and oils than recommended” (Walker, 2015). There are several reasons for the prominence of such an unhealthy diet. American food systems rely on capitalistic efficiency, pushing consumers towards fast and easy food consumption. Those who shop at large grocery chains will find that packaged

and processed foods are not only more abundant, but also more affordable than fresh produce and proteins (Walker, 2015). Aside from the microplastics found in most living organisms, packaged and processed foods are more likely to have toxic levels of plastic and chemicals that affect the body and brain (Gubert, 2021, p. 5245). Prolonged consumption of SAD produces negative health outcomes for many Americans. Linoleic acids, the main fatty acid in SAD, has been associated with a plethora of illnesses including “cardiovascular disease, cancer, and Alzheimer’s” (Mercola, 2023, p. 2). In sum, the food we consume correlates with our health.

Despite the vast amount of food produced by the industrialized capitalist food system, it comes at a great cost: “food insecurity for 45 million Americans (half of them children), obesity in nearly two-thirds of adults, incalculable damage to our soil, air, water, and foods excessively high in calories, sugars, and salt” (Holt-Gimenez, 2017, p. 9). These problems are rooted in how capitalism turns food—indispensable to life—into a commodity. Food companies do not work towards promoting “life, health, or happiness,” but rather making money for executives and shareholders (Holt-Gimenez, 2017, p. 10). Wealth within the food systems is extracted and sent directly to those already on the top of the food chain (eh, get it?). The capitalist aka shareholders (often white, cis, men) benefit from food consumers at the detriment of the laborer aka the working class (often already marginalized at several intersections). Relatedly, “capitalist food systems keep labor and all other costs to a minimum and provides an enormous overabundance of cheap food, consequences be damned” (Holt-Gimenez, 2017, p. 11). This manifests in the overconsumption of over-processed and packaged foods especially by poor Black and Brown communities.

In response to a harmful food system, food activists aim to better serve the environment, the working class, economy, and marginalized communities that otherwise are harmed by the dominant food system. One example is programs that “redistribute surplus foods to the low-income such as soup kitchens and food pantries” (Mousa, 2022, p. 183). Nonprofits like Feeding America have helped create nationwide networks of food banks, pantries, and meal programs that provide resources to people facing hunger (Feeding America). Each individual entity under Feeding America works to rescue, store, and distribute food through local food banks and meal programs that help individuals and families put food on the table. In partnership with Feeding America, the Larimer County Food Bank operates as a 501(C)(3) distributing free food to its customer base. Remarkably, operating as a food share no-cost market, the food bank provides food to more than 40,000 people each year, largely from community and grocery donations as well as federal grant dollars (FBLC).

Not dissimilar to food banks, food rescues recover food waste produced by an ever-rampant industrial food system where “up to 40% of the U.S. food supply is wasted” (Food Rescue). Over 20 billion pounds of food goes directly from farms into landfills every year (Food Rescue). The logic of overproduction within the capitalist industrial food system promotes large-scale waste, not only of food, but of time, effort, energy, and life, of laborers. By reducing the amount of food from traditional farms and grocers that would end up in a landfill, food rescue organizations reduce greenhouse gas emissions, reduce food insecurity, and give those experiencing hunger better access to fresh foods (Food Rescue). On a local level, residents in Fort Collins can go to Vindeket—a non-profit that rescues “excess, imperfect, messy, and outdated food” to reduce food waste and increase food access (Vindeket). The benefit of such

efforts goes further than reducing waste and increasing access by shifting attitudes about consumption, waste, and alternative exchange.

Organizations such as food banks and food rescues provide critical services and platforms for broader change within our food systems, but they are often still embedded in whiteness, which complicates their efficacy. Alison Alkon, a food justice scholar, writes that “whiteness refers not only to the clustering of pale bodies...but also suggests that such spaces are shaped by a white cultural practice” and “particularly patterned set of thoughts, behaviors, and tastes that we refer to as an affluent, liberal habit” (2010, p. 938-939). The so called “whiteness” of a space or a movement inevitably and simultaneously maintains the exclusion of “non-whites” as well. This, in turn, becomes a barrier that hinders the participation and visibility of people of color within alternative food systems and “constrain[s] the ability of those food systems to meaningfully address inequality” (Alkon, 2010, 938). Whiteness can mask other groups in the food system. For instance, Alkon notes that “predominantly white vendors who ‘grow their food’ render invisible the low-paid, predominantly Latino/a workers who did the bulk of the cultivation” (Alkon, 2010, p. 939). This highlights the common perseverance of whiteness that results in governing power over much of the decisions made in alternative food spaces—decisions that are frequently made by and for, white individuals, to the detriment to people of color.

Whiteness often coincides with neoliberal and settler-colonial ideologies that complicate alternative food efforts. For example, food as commodity rather than essential or medicinal remains a pervasive attitude throughout the West. Moreover, the cultural dominance of whiteness fails to reflect the intersections of race and class. Ultimately, this framework preserves a system where the priorities of the wealthy, predominantly white, elite take precedence, heightening

inequalities in access to health and well-being for marginalized communities. As a Black woman, I identify these ideologies frequently in alternative spaces where “justice” is quoted as a foundational principle. In light of affirmative action policies, many organizations, including food justice programs, have worked to implement DEIJ (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice) into their company dogma. Yet, for many of the people this is meant to serve, I find these commitments fall short of actualization outside of being words on a home page. For much of the marginalized community, the ‘justice’ part of food justice initiatives is severely lacking in tangible processes and experiences. The pervasion of white attitudes and cultures overshadows the experiences of marginalized populations only furthering the operation of capitalism, neoliberalism, and colonialism, where as narratives situated in Blackness engage simultaneously in conversations “concern[ing] the persistent threats to Black life and [other] problems produced by the increasingly global and corporate food system” (Garth and Reese, 2020, p. 17). Patterns of Black thought (similar to many of our other non-white counterparts) tend to rely less on a unilateral approach and center the harm done both historically and contemporarily by pervasive whiteness.

This is not intended to villainize white people. There are some nascent efforts to address the colorblindness and whiteness of alternative food efforts. In Feeding America’s most recent report, *Food is Medicine*, they support that “food insecurity is present in all counties, parishes, and boroughs, with racial and ethnic minorities experiencing disproportionately higher rates contributing to persistent health disparities and inequities in marginalized populations” (FAHH). Such a position begins to move away from dismissiveness and normalization of white-only experiences, perspectives, and ideologies in alternative spaces, but must begin to actualize policy

change, support programs, and attitude changes that reflect this perspective in order to realize their goal of food ‘justice’ for all.

Takeaways From Conversations with Local Food Bank and Food Rescue Organization

In efforts to see for myself how well alternative food resources serve “racial and ethnic minorities,” I took the opportunity to talk with leadership at both Larimer County Food Bank and Vindeket Food Rescue about their commitment to cultural inclusivity.

Zach Clark Lee, the operations manager at Vindeket foods testifies to the organization's role in broader community inclusion. When asked about Vindeket’s main demographic, he states, “We don’t have one. Everyone from all walks of life shop here. We have opened the doors to the entire community and that's how we want it.” As an organization, Vindeket pursues the ideals of community-led access for all, and without requiring proof of income or for any identifying information, it seems that “all walks of life” should have equitable access to the resources they provide. Lee continues to address Vindeket’s take on cultural inclusivity, noting that they donate rescued food to several organizations with missions parallel to their own. Matthew’s House, which serves youth and families experiencing homelessness, and both the Wind River reservation in Wyoming and the Pine Ridge reservation in South Dakota, receive these donations. Both populations often experience much higher levels of food insecurity. Lee sustains that Vindeket is a resource dedicated to serving all reaches of the community.

After reaching out to the communications coordinator at Larimer County Food Bank, I was able to receive comments from the organizations Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Amy Pezzani on their engagement with meaningful inclusion efforts. Pezzani outlined LCFB’s main

demographics, noting that they serve “individuals and families making 200% or less of the federal poverty level.” As of 2024, this refers to individuals making up to \$30,120 and a family of 3 making \$51,640 or less (CO. Department of Local Affairs). She continues, stating that “client[ele] are as diverse as Larimer County itself including two parent working families, single parents, seniors, college students and veterans. Our clients disproportionately identify as Hispanic compared to the general population of Larimer County. We never ask for immigration status, so we have no way of knowing this about the people we serve.” Understanding that the organization serves large populations of hispanic and/or Spanish-speaking individuals and families, they have implemented a differential pay initiative to promote the hiring of lasting Spanish speaking staff. They shared a EDI (Equity, Diversity, & Inclusion) Roadmap with me, including their outlined differential pay programming, as well as other language accessibility, anti-stigma, and education campaigns meant to reach not only clients, but also LCFB staff, board, and volunteers. Pezzani maintains that the food bank is committed to a “brighter, more inclusive future for all, through active listening and continuous education.” As promising as this is, I was eager to witness the initiative that underscores the food bank’s dedication to more inclusive community access points.

Takeaways From Visits to a Local Food Bank and Food Rescue Organization

While it was great to hear what people in local food access spaces had to say about cultural inclusivity, there was no better way to understand the issue than to see for myself. I set out the goal to see what dishes I could come up with as a Black, low-income, culturally conscious consumer in Larimer County, Colorado. I was especially interested in finding sauces and spices. Of course, it is better to have bland food than no food at all. But is the expectation of

food banks and food rescue organizations truly for clients to eat eggs with no salt or pepper? To use produce in a soup with no seasoning at all? To fry chicken in a skillet with nothing but a tab of butter? And what does this expectation say about a willingness (or lack thereof) to provide equitable access to culturally relevant foods? Based on my experience, one of the most cost efficient and widely implementable ways to increase cultural inclusivity within alternative food resources is to center the importance of and access to spices.

To keep this project as closely aligned with the “typical” alternative shopping experience as possible, I allotted one week to research resources, schedule drop-in time, gather ingredients, and prepare the dishes. My hope was to challenge myself to cook at least one thing that was culturally significant to me using only ingredients from the Larimer County Food Bank and from Vindeket, that would last through the week. My “research” began online, as both markets often rely on online communication to broadcast drop-in hours, pick up times, and store locations. I am privileged enough to have access to reliable technology and found this part of the experience rather seamless. The websites appeared updated, accurate, and easy to use. I worked to find time to shop for ingredients throughout my busy schedule, which proved to be much more difficult. Whether it was conflicts, peak hours, or lack of timely transportation, I could only make it to Vindeket drop-in hours on Thursday evening and the food bank drop-in hours on Friday morning. I imagine others face the same issues—often not shopping or eating until their schedule complies and transport is available. Both organizations offer drop-off/take away boxes to be delivered to individuals and families, but there is limited supply, and it takes more than one week to set-up and initiate the program services (FBLC & Vindeket).

My experience at Vindeket was a pleasant one filled with volunteers who had extreme passion for food rescue and shelves that were full of fresh produce. I was greeted at the door,

asked how many I was shopping for, and handed a cardboard box for my goods. I was able to gather a sizable haul— potatoes, carrots, celery, kale, hot peppers, apples, peaches, tomatoes, one onion, cucumbers, and a sourdough baguette—again, all at no cost to me. Demographics at Vindeket were reflective of much of Fort Collin’s population, which is white and 25+ years of age (US Census Bureau). This is reflected in the organization's leadership and volunteers as well, who were helpful in shopping at Vindeket market. Since Vindeket is a food rescue, shoppers are offered whatever grocers did not want that week. The day I went, there was an overabundance of cucumbers, but not enough dairy and meat products to go around. There were no spices except for a spare box of pepper packets. To take fresh produce, a person needs access to cooking equipment like knives or pots, cooking appliances like a microwave, stove, or fridge, and the time to put fresh food to use.

In talking with leadership at Vindeket, one would come to expect a fair amount of diversity within their sphere of work. However, my visits to Vindeket did not reflect diversity within these spaces. Perhaps it is atmosphere, actual number of diverse bodies to be seen (or lack thereof), set-up, location or leadership demographic that gives their space a “feel” of whiteness. Perhaps it is because, as Lee outlined “we (Vindeket) are an environmental company trying to save food before it goes to the landfill,” not necessarily a food access program trying to increase outreach to communities of diverse backgrounds. The question then becomes, who, if anyone, is prioritizing diverse communities in the mission to end hunger?

Overall, my experience at Vindeket was one veiled in whiteness. As Alkon attests, the nature of a white space can be defined by more than just “the clustering of pale bodies” (which was surely present) but rather extends to a “white cultural practice” (2010, p. 938-9). Although Vindeket maintains that “everyone from all walks of life shop here,” not all walks of life feel as

though they can actually show up. As a food rescue they are limited by whatever runoff the local grocery chains give them. In a predominantly white town, that often means foods within the white cultural practice like breads or pasta. It was my hope that grocers would also be passing down spices—what many people of color rely on to create a more inclusive range of food for themselves, but there were none to be found. While I was able to access fresh vegetables and breads, I was pushed to be hyper-creative with their use to fill cultural desires where a white individual may not have to. As a resource, Vindeket caters to the white experience, discounting more culturally diverse palettes and limiting inclusivity.



Image 1. Vindeket Food Box



Image 2. Larimer County Food Bank Box

My trip to the Food Bank of Larimer County was different in several ways. Along with hundreds of food banks around the country, lines to access food shares have grown exceedingly long. When I visited the food bank around 10:30 on Friday morning, I waited in line for over an hour before I ever saw any food. This speaks to the intense demand for food that exists in Fort Collins. My process was made easier by filling out a pre-visit form, a privilege that many others do not have due to limited access to reliable technology and Wi-Fi. The demographics were much more diverse than at Vindeket. I saw many (if not most) individuals of non-white background, families, parents with young children, unhoused individuals, and non-English/multilingual speakers. Those who had the time to wait in line for over an hour were

given access to a large warehouse of foods including fresh produce, dried goods, bakery items, dairy, and meat—however limited. I picked up heirloom tomatoes, meat filling, beets, cilantro, pineapple, corn, and hot sauce, though they offered much more than that including things like dried lentils, potatoes, summer melons, and small bags of chips. The dairy was limited to boxed cheesecake bites and meat was a pre-packaged and seasoned pork taco filling. Both in demographic and in food options, the food bank was more diverse. Yet, all positions of power, leadership, and decision-makers remained overwhelmingly white—from the volunteers to floor managers. I feel that Feeding America and their associated food bank programs, through both research and on-the-ground initiatives are on the path to greater cultural inclusivity. Although their leadership remains unilateral, much of their staff is armed with lived experience with food insecurity and tools like being multilingual to bridge the barriers of a white-dominated alternative food system. This alone fosters a space of broader inclusivity for culturally diverse eaters, but pairs nicely with the variety of foods offered. LCFB did not carry spices like I had hoped, but they did have two varieties of spiced hot sauce (mild and medium) as well as foods that can be easily prepared by a variety of cultures like dried lentils which are used a lot in East African dishes (among others). I was happy to see foods that I would in the African deposes back home, as I'm sure many others were as well.

Preparing Meals with Emergency Food Items

It finally came time to start preparing meals with the ingredients from Vindeket and FBLC. Though even with extensive fresh ingredients and a fully primed kitchen, I was nervous about recreating some of my favorite cultural dishes with foods found in an overwhelmingly white cultural context without any spices. To complement my efforts to acquire food for free I

therefore decided to use any other ingredients I could find that I did not pay for: herbs from the garden, honey from the neighbors, or cream cheese from Waffle House. I started first with a dish to compliment morning tea. In Uganda, it is customary to begin the day with tea of any kind—both for pleasure and for medicinal benefits. Many teas are high in polyphenol acids that play a role in cellular proliferation, angiogenesis, and reduction in inflammation and carcinogens in the body (Zamora, 2019, p. 3034). Hibiscus tea is particularly relevant in Uganda holding many antioxidants and supporting kidney and liver health. I made a “breakfast” dish that would pair well. I used the sourdough baguette as a base, topped with cream cheese packets I had taken from Waffle House earlier that day. I added slices of white peach from Vindeket, honey from a local grower who donated it to my thesis, and cilantro from LCFB. This paired exceptionally well with fresh basil from my parents' countertop garden and the tiniest pieces of fried garlic to round out the taste. This was a beautiful, sweet and savory, pairing that used many components that can be found in a more traditional Ugandan breakfast—fresh fruit, honey, and bread.



Image 3. Dish One

The next, and possibly most challenging meal, was to recreate a staple in African cuisine: Beef stew. Eastern Africa relies heavily on their flatlands and cattle farming, increasing intake of beef and iron rich foods. The Food Bank of Larimer County was able to offer meat—pork—packaged in 1/2-gallon bags, pre-seasoned as “Mexican taco filling.” As someone who was raised in the U.S. around several cultures, I felt surprisingly prepared to somehow shift from Mexican tacos to Ugandan stew, but I imagine that others who also waited in line for over an hour would not feel similarly. For example, families of East or South Asian descent might have trouble recreating a dish of cultural importance since what was offered clearly catered to a specific audience. Individuals and families of Islamic faith could not eat this at all because it is

haram (not halal). Again, this is not to say that the resources provided by the food bank are not absolutely needed and appreciated, in this case by those of Mexican descent, but it points to the fact that there are other diverse community food needs unmet.

Beef stew is traditionally served with some sort of carbohydrate, whether is it Chapati (flatbread made from wheat flour), or Posho/Ugali (corn meal made from maize and wrapped in banana leaf), or even just long grain rice. Ugandans are “primarily agriculturalists, [with] seventy six percent of the population farm subsistence crops including matooke, cassava, maize, sweet potatoes, millet, sorghum, beans and groundnuts” all things that are commonly found in more densely diverse areas like Aurora, where I grew up (Gerney, 2021, p. 17275). The city of Aurora is by far more culturally literate than Fort Collins, likely due to differences in racial make-up (US Census Bureau). Unsurprisingly, there was not so much as a grain of rice in either Vindeket or FBLC. Foods as universal as rice would be a game changer in providing access to cultural normalcy. I opted instead for potatoes which, again, are a staple in the Western world, and add to the atmosphere of white-centric eating that alternative food access point cannot seem to escape.

For this dish I used potatoes, carrots, kale, tomatoes, onion, and peppers from Vindeket, and taco filling, cilantro, hot sauce, and heirloom tomatoes from the food bank. I added several things that I already had--all of them being spices. I tried to keep it basic, using only salt, garlic powder, and garam masala (a blend of crushed spices made from cinnamon, peppercorn, cardamom, mustard seeds, coriander, cloves, nutmeg, and mace).



Image 4. Dish 2

Since food banks are often based on donations from individuals or grocers, and a 1/4-gallon bag of garam masala (which would last most people more than a year) is on market for no more than five to six dollars, it really wouldn't be that financially infeasible for individuals to buy and donate something of this nature. Of course, this is only one example. Things like seasoning salt or soy sauce are equally inexpensive but are largely overlooked in individual donations because of a white centric perspective that does not account for the culturally diverse.

The last thing I made with these ingredients was a fresh juice and a hot juice. Based on discussion with my mom, a cold and hot juice pairing is common in many tropical areas like Uganda who use hot liquids (tea, coffee, juice...) to snuff out infection from the moist air. The

cold juice consisted of celery, cucumber, beets, carrots, pineapple, and ginger (from parent's garden). Beets are frequented in the East African diet to boost heart, brain, bone, and digestive health. I used the pulp from this cold-pressed juice to make Munanasi; a hot juice made from pineapple rinds, ginger, and tea leaves. This time I used hibiscus flower and cinnamon as well to create added benefits that are especially good for women's health and in reducing morning sickness and cramping in pregnant women. Unlike much of the West, Africa has worked to preserve oral traditions and medicinal eating, relying on the land for much of their easily accessible "health care."



Image 5. Munanasi Juice

So how do my efforts to acquire and cook food connect to the larger conversation about a lack of culturally inclusive foods from emergency food organizations. While emergency food efforts like food banks and food rescue operations deal with the excess of an industrialized food system, they are still hindered by systemic injustices associated with the pervasiveness of whiteness. This is demonstrated in a lack of foods that cater to any non-white populations (perhaps other than Latino/a communities) like at the Food Bank of Larimer County and creating spaces of white normalcy like at Vindeket.

There is value in acknowledging where alternative food efforts are falling short in serving diverse populations. It would likely not be too difficult to become more culturally competent and inclusive by including universal staples and spices in alternative food spaces. Offering simple spices like salt, pepper, garlic and onion powders, or seasoning salt will drastically increase the actualization of meals for culturally diverse individuals and families. Similarly, incorporating baseline staples that cater to a more universal audience like rice rather than just pasta noodles or potatoes, would open spaces for global audiences to better access food resources with some level of cultural normalcy. This is a form of anti-racism, inclusion, and solidarity. The experience outlined in this thesis is truly only the first of many steps in actualizing these initiatives. Working alongside these organizations to have conversations about culturally appropriate access and solidarity-based food systems only paves the way for a more just and hunger-free future for everyone.

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