AMERICAN UNIVERSITY
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**Department of Economics
Working Paper Series**

Recession and the Social Economy

by

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July 2010

<http://www.american.edu/cas/economics/research/papers.cfm>

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Recession and the social economy

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July 2010

Abstract

In recessions, there is typically an increase in unmet basic needs -- for food, shelter and health care. While government programs offset these to some extent, and friends and family may also help, an important role is also played by the 'social economy', i.e. private, nonprofit organizations relying primarily on donations, grants and volunteer labor to support social welfare in their communities. This paper reviews evidence on the growth of unmet needs during recession and documents social-economy mechanisms that aim to contain them. The analysis highlights hallmarks of social-economy models that make them well-suited to accommodating unmet needs, including use of multiple strategies to mobilize resources, ingenuity, efficiency, cooperation, and a dominant ethic of care. It also identifies fragilities in social-economy models and inherent issues of power imbalance between those offering and receiving help. While some view these problems as underlining the need for more generous government programs to meet basic needs, the paper takes the contrary position that the social economy constitutes a critical reserve of nonmarket, nongovernment values that hold better promise for addressing issues of need and social justice than expanded entitlements. As such, the question is how to reduce fragilities and imbalances in the social economy, where furthering its institutional innovations is likely key. These include information sharing, cooperative backbones supporting frontline agencies, strategic connections with socially responsible businesses, and stakeholder strategies that upturn relationships between 'helpers' and 'helped'.

JEL Codes: A130, D630, L310, Q180

Key words: Social economy, social enterprise, basic needs, food security, social justice

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Introduction

Recessions often see an increase in unmet needs for food, shelter, and health care. For many households, a spell of unemployment entails economic hardship, but they can cover basic spending on groceries, utilities, the rent or mortgage, medications, etc., using the income of a second earner, accumulated savings, and/or unemployment insurance. But other households, especially those who are economically vulnerable to begin with, tip more easily into difficulties paying for basics of everyday life. In principle, various government programs can help cover basic consumption needs, including food stamps, Medicaid health insurance, unemployment insurance, housing vouchers, and welfare payments. Yet especially in recessions, when people who lose their jobs do not know how long they will be unemployed, it may be awhile before they apply for benefits and begin to receive support, if they are eligible. Moreover, government benefits usually only partially cover spending on basics; thus, for example, many recipients report that their food stamps run out before the end of the month. Additionally, some people with unmet basic needs may not be eligible for government programs (e.g. immigrants with problematic status), while others prefer not to rely on public support.

In circumstances like these, people often turn to social-economy organizations for help in alleviating unmet basic needs. While the term ‘social economy’ has different meanings in different contexts (see, e.g. Moulaert and Ailenei 2005), in general it refers to economic activity that is (a) oriented to improving social welfare, with a particular concern for disadvantaged groups, and (b) organized neither by the government, nor by privately-owned profit-oriented firms, but rather by private organizations whose activities are governed by logics other than profit maximization. Within the social economy, a highly varied assemblage of actors organizes activities aimed at addressing unmet needs for food, shelter, and health care, including religious, charitable, community, and private voluntary groups. Some operate on a national scale and are exclusively concerned with meeting a basic need; for example, the organization Feeding America, which distributed 340 million pounds of food donated by companies through the national food-bank system in 2009. Others, such as local churches that operate food pantries, are relatively small and conduct needs-oriented work as part of a broader set of activities. Throughout the needs-oriented sectors of the social economy, a very high share of labor hours is volunteer.

Although popular press reports suggest that social-economy organizations have worked overtime to help economically-strapped people contend with the 2007-09 recession (e.g. Deparle and Gebeloff 2009; Bosman 2009), to date there has been little research investigating the extent to which unmet basic needs rise in recessions, nor the effectiveness of social-economy organizations in mobilizing to offset them. The role of the social economy in addressing unmet needs has been ideologically charged in recent decades, as it raises questions about the proper scope of government in alleviating hardship and ensuring widespread access to decent consumption standards. In particular, the scaling back of income-support programs, in the face of stagnant earnings in the lower part of the income distribution suggests

to critics that the social economy is filling voids that ought to be filled by the state (e.g. Poppendieck 1999). Yet as this paper will discuss, that perspective tends to reflect an overly simple understanding of where responsibility for upholding basic tenets of social justice lies, neglecting responsibilities that fall upon individuals, communities, and businesses as well as upon the state. It is also out of line with present realities of government budget constraints and voter distaste for (re)expanding government social programs. This makes it increasingly important to understand how the social economy works, and to investigate how well logics other than public-service delivery and/or profit-maximization do in addressing social problems.

The next section of this paper discusses conceptual issues underlying the role of social economy in addressing problems of basic needs and lays out how changes in its access to resources in recession might be expected to affect its ability to respond to rising unmet needs. The third section presents available data on changes in unmet needs for food, shelter and health care following the onset of recession in late 2007. The fourth section analyzes the dynamics of the social-economy response to rising unmet needs, taking the specific example of the emergency-food system. The fifth section draws implications for our understanding of the social economy and its ability to support and advance social welfare in advanced-industrial economies subject to aggregate fluctuations, where the costs of these fluctuations tend to fall on anyway vulnerable groups.

Social economy and unmet basic needs

The concept of ‘unmet basic needs’ is hard to deal with in traditional economic analysis, which is critical of the idea of any hard-and-fast distinction between ‘wants’ and ‘needs’. To be sure, given the complexities of how material goods and services fit into people’s lives, it is not straightforward to differentiate between goods and services that are in some sense fundamental requisites of a materially sufficient life, and others that are highly valued but not strictly necessary. For one, some things are perceived as ‘necessities’ because they figure integrally into the prevailing material living standard, so that people doing without them may look odd, eccentric, or deficient (e.g. as wearing a hat used to be for men). For another, people come to perceive as necessities those things which they consume or use habitually, as they take on the character of natural parts of a materially and socially satisfying life (e.g. a car to get to work, a phone to communicate with friends and conduct personal business, etc.).

At the same time, insisting too much on the social and contextual character of ‘needs’ obscures the question as to whether *some* things are so central to human wellbeing that, especially in societies with sufficient wealth and resources to cover everyone’s needs in this sense, there is a social or moral obligation to make provisions for these needs to be met. Various philosophical, psychological, ethical, and religious frameworks offer conceptualizations of basic human needs; important examples are shown in Table 1. While they differ appreciably in their specifics, they all have at their foundation a

minimalist set of items viewed as so central to human wellbeing that without them people have poor chances of living lives they have reason to value and/or that cannot otherwise be understood as ‘right’ or ‘good’. For example, at the base of Maslow’s well-known hierarchy of needs are physiological and safety-related needs; Maslow posited that until these are satisfied people will not be motivated or able to pursue higher-order needs for belonging, esteem and self-actualization. In Nussbaum’s elaboration of the human-capabilities framework, bodily health and bodily integrity are understood as two of ten of the capabilities people require to be able to lead lives they have reason to value, with access to adequate food and shelter and safeguards on personal safety figuring centrally in these capabilities. Rights-based approaches also posit that all people have fundamental rights to food, water, clothing, shelter, physical security, and health care. Religious traditions like Catholic Social Thought and Islamic Economic Thought also recognize these items as basic human needs to which all should have access, by virtue of God’s intentions for the bounty of the earth. In many though not all of these frameworks, there is also an emphasis on *qualitative* needs related to respect for the agency and dignity of the human person: it is not enough to ensure that the needy are supplied with basic goods and services; they also need to feel like fully participating members of society worthy of respect. Altogether, this suggests a ‘modest essentialism’ (Powers and Faden 2006) in identifying the most basic of human needs, emphasizing the importance of adequate access to food, shelter, clothing and health care in biophysical functioning and social participation, along with positive social identity and self-worth.

These frameworks share a common intuition that the imperative character of basic needs implies some form of social responsibility to ensure they are met, both in an immediate sense (i.e. that food and shelter can fairly readily be obtained by those who urgently need them) and in terms of longer-term projects to eliminate underlying causes of unmet needs. Given the present paper’s focus on recession, our interest is primarily in social mechanisms intended to provide immediate access to food and shelter, although we deal with the question of how they relate to longer-term projects later in the paper. These frameworks vary, however, in how they frame the origin of this responsibility and what social agent(s) they understand as having obligation(s) to execute it. Virtually all frameworks implicitly view the state as needing to play a central role in this respect, in so far as ‘the state’ is a primary vehicle for expressing the public will and/or has natural advantages in conducting redistributive programs fairly and efficiently.¹ Yet several of the needs-related frameworks, especially those grounded in religious and humanistic traditions, take social responsibility for meeting needs to be more widely dispersed. In both Catholic Social Thought and Islamic Economic Thought, individuals are called upon to conduct their lives in ways that incorporate concern for the wellbeing of the needy, with community-based organizations (civic, religious, educational) also expected to mobilize resources to

¹ Thus, for example, J.S. Mill [1909(1848): 969] remarked that ‘Charity almost always does too much or too little: it lavishes its bounty in one place, and leaves people to starve in another’. See also Lynn (2002: 58), who argues that “public policy is more likely than private charity to ensure well-financed, equitable, efficiently administered, and uniformly available social services.”

fill basic needs and channel them to the disadvantaged in ways that respect human dignity. Overlapping with the contemporary discourse of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), Catholic Social Thought also views for-profit businesses as having obligations to share the fruits of production with the less fortunate, for example, by supporting charitable work in the communities in which they operate (Starr 2009).

Understanding responsibility for meeting basic needs as broadly distributed within society has important practical advantages over understanding it as overwhelmingly the responsibility of the state. For one, it helps maintain reserves of social values that contrast with those of commercial culture, which emphasize emulative consumption, accumulation and display of wealth, and other endeavors rooted in self-interest and material satisfactions. These contrasting values include an *ethic of care* -- described by Gilligan (1982) as “seeing and responding to need, taking care of the world by sustaining the web of connection” -- and other imperatives to take action to meet the needs of others (e.g. the duty of alms-giving in Islam). For another, it acknowledges that actually-existing governments cannot simply be willed to guard against unmet needs, but rather must be charged with this responsibility as an outcome of the political process.² Thus, for example, needs-related spending may lose out to other types of programs in contests over funding, and/or the populace may not share the belief that this is properly the role of the state.³ This underlies Weisbrod’s (e.g. 1988) view of why there are non-profits in market-based economies: If people’s social preferences are heterogeneous and politics are majoritarian, governments will provide only those services upon which a majority of people agree; those who want to see more of a given service produced can contribute time, money and resources to private non-governmental endeavors formed to augment supply above the level determined by political consensus.

It is relatively difficult to gauge the size and scope of the needs-oriented social economy in the U.S. One problem is that available data on non-profit organizations are classified by the general area in which they work, rather than the specific activities they undertake. For example, the Boy Scouts of America is a youth membership organization with quite varied goals and activities, of which one is an annual “Scouting for Food” drive in which local chapters collect canned goods for local food banks. Another is that they use such eclectic mixes of funding, labor, and inputs that it is difficult to assemble a broad picture of the resources upon which they call. Funding comes from federal, state, and local

² See, for example, Dawson’s (1994) review of Doyal and Gough’s (1991) *Theory of Human Need*.

³ In fact, there does appear to be dispersion of opinion within the U.S. populace in this respect: In response to a 1998 Gallup poll that asked, “‘Which one of the following groups do you think has the greatest responsibility for helping the poor: churches, private charities, the government, the families and relatives of poor people, the poor themselves, or someone else?’, 32 percent of respondents said the government, 28 percent said the poor themselves, 20 percent said churches and charities, 12 percent said families of the poor, with the remaining 8 percent saying ‘someone else’ or ‘no opinion’ (Gallup News Service 1998).

governments, as well as donations from households, foundations, and corporations. A very high share of the labor they use comes from unpaid volunteers. Their inputs are both purchased and donated; for example (as will be discussed further), much of the food distributed through the emergency-food network is donated by businesses with unsold food. Nonetheless, available data suggest that the needs-oriented social-economy entails a large number of relatively small organizations that get by on shoestrings; see Table 2. Thus, for example, of the \$250 billion households contributed to nonprofits in 2005, only 8 percent was explicitly targeted to meeting basic needs for food, shelter, and other necessities (Center for Philanthropy, Indiana University 2007). Among people over age 16 who volunteer, 9-10 percent are involved in collecting, preparing, distributing, and/or serving food (BLS 2010).

Given that the social economy depends on flows of financial and productive resources from businesses, foundations, private donors, volunteers, and governments, it is important to lay out how effects of aggregate downturns on those sectors could affect the ability of the social economy to respond to rising basic needs. First, to the extent that people's willingness to volunteer in needs-oriented work and make donations to support it is a function of perceived needs, rising hardship experienced by others may result in increased volunteering and donations in needs-oriented work. Second, however, declining incomes, increased uncertainty, and declining values of financial assets are likely to reduce inflows of private financial support for the social economy, although needs-oriented work may suffer less than other subsectors.⁴ Third, access to funding from state and local governments may also drop during recessions, if (as would be expected) they need to scale back spending in line with their lower tax revenues. Any special fiscal stimulus introduced at the Federal level, however, may offset this drop to some degree. Fourth, weakness in the labor market may increase volunteering in recessions, to the extent that opportunity costs of people's time are lower than in normal economic times. Finally, business donations of unsold goods may either rise or fall during a downturn. Supplies of unsold goods may rise initially as aggregate demand contracts, so that inflows of food and other grocery items to social-economy organizations may at first increase. But as companies adjust production and inventory levels in response to weaker economic conditions, they may try harder to keep their margins of unsold goods trim. Conversely, however, increased efforts to demonstrate social responsibility may promote special efforts on the part of businesses to show themselves to be helping to fill unmet needs, so they may divert resources out of other CSR projects into need-oriented contributions. Altogether, then, it is hard to predict *a priori* how vigorously the needs-oriented social economy can respond to deficits in basic needs that may emerge during downturns.

Unmet needs and the 2007-09 downturn

⁴ Navarro (1988) analyzes income elasticities of corporate donations.

Not surprisingly, given the severity of the 2007-09 downturn, many measures of unmet needs rose after late 2007, when the downturn began. As shown in Table 3, the national civilian unemployment rate doubled between the fourth quarter of 2007 and that of 2009. Increases in rates were greater among blacks and Hispanics compared to non-Hispanic whites, for whom rates were anyway lowest at the outset; this is consistent with well-established findings in the literature that less advantaged groups experience more unemployment and larger declines in earnings in recessions.⁵ The official poverty rate -- intended to capture the share of people not able to afford basics of healthy living (based on estimated costs of a nutritionally sufficient diet, household size, and assumptions about the share of food costs in total spending on necessities) -- rose from 12.5% in 2007 to 13.2% in 2008, with the largest increase among Hispanics. Numerically, the ranks of the poor swelled by 2.5 million people in the recession's first year. Shares of people with incomes of 50% of the poverty line or less, who are particularly likely to be experiencing regular and appreciable deficits in basic needs, also moved up for all groups.

Table 4 presents information on access to consumption support and health insurance via government programs. The share of households receiving food stamps moved up by about one percentage point, reaching 8.6 percent in 2008. Despite rising poverty, receipt of cash income support hardly budged, at least partly due to tighter constraints on eligibility imposed in the welfare reform of the 1990s. There was slippage in the share of people having health insurance under an employer-provided plan -- although this was offset in good part by increased participation in government health-insurance programs (e.g. the Medicaid program for people with low incomes, SCHIPS programs for children, etc.).⁶ The share of newly unemployed workers filing for UI benefits between 2007 and 2009 moved up as the economy ploughed into recession; still, this share was only 40% in 2009, reflecting both ineligibility and less-than-full-uptake among people who are eligible (see, e.g. Wenger 2003 and references therein).

Looking more directly at measures of unmet needs, Table 5 presents information on insecurities in access to food and health care. The U.S. Department of Agriculture compiles annual statistics on "food insecurity", where households are classified as "food insecure" if at some time during the past year they were uncertain of having or unable to acquire enough food to meet the needs of all their members, due to insufficient money or other resources for food. Between 2007 and 2008, the share of households facing some food insecurity rose from 11.1 percent to 14.6 percent, a significant and notable increase. While critics point out that this measure of insecurity captures even highly transitory disruptions in access to food, a narrower measure of households with very low food security -- those

⁵ See, for example, the collection of papers in Cherry and Rodgers (2000).

⁶ See Holahan and Ghosh (2004) and Cawley and Simon (2005) on changes in health insurance coverage in the 2001 recession.

who had to limit their food intake or disrupt their normal eating habits at times during the year due to lack of money and other resources for food -- also moved up, from 4.1 percent in 2007 to 5.7 percent in 2008. Rates rose particularly for black and Hispanic households. Further analysis shows that children rarely have to go without food: adults cut back their own consumption to ensure that children can eat (Mathematica Policy Research 2010). Still, in one of the world's wealthiest countries, any rise in unmet needs for food is obviously disturbing.

With respect to health, Table 5 also shows that the share of adults reporting themselves to be in "fair" or "poor" health held steady or even slipped a bit between 2007 and 2008. This is consistent with Ruhm's (2000, 2003) finding that "recessions are good for your health" -- because a number of behaviors related to serious health problems (drinking, smoking, driving, work-related stressors that aggravate hypertension) tend to fall off in recessions. However, the final panel of the table also shows that the share of people who didn't get or delayed getting medical care in the past year rose from 13.5 percent in 2007 to 15.5 percent in 2008, suggesting that even if the incidence of health-related problems does not rise in recessions, there may be harder-to-detect lagged effects of slippage in routine care.

Table 6 presents information relevant to gauging inadequate access to shelter. While the total estimated number of people who had used emergency shelters or transitional housing programs over the preceding 12 months hardly changed between 2007 and 2008, there were some important shifts in the composition of people entering shelters. For one, the number of individuals entering shelters fell, but the number of persons in families increased, which is especially alarming given evidence that for children any spell in homelessness has long-term negative consequences (Fertig and Reingold 2008). For another, the share of people entering shelters who had previously been staying in another shelter or sleeping in a place not intended for human habitation fell between 2007 and 2008, while the share coming from their own home or apartment or from staying with friends or family increased. It is suspected that these shifts are fall-outs of the foreclosure crisis, although this is hard to establish. One study found that 4 percent of people arriving at shelters previously resided at an address where a foreclosure occurred, where one half were renters who were evicted and the other were homeowners who were themselves foreclosed (Pettitt et al 2009).

The social economy of emergency food

To analyze the response of the social economy to rising unmet needs, we focus on the case of the emergency food system -- the network of food banks, food pantries and soup kitchens that aim to supply food to those with unmet needs. The emergency food system is of special interest both because insecure access to food in a wealthy society is troubling *per se* and because statistics on emergency

food are relatively good, reflecting the presence of coordinating structures within the system and its integration with various government programs.

In principle, the Federal government runs a number of programs intended to guard against unmet needs for food, including food stamps; the supplemental nutrition program for women, infants and children (WIC); the national school lunch program; and others. In practice, however, these programs only go partway towards covering unmet needs for food. Not everyone who meets income criteria for benefits satisfies other criteria for eligibility (e.g. undocumented immigrants). Newly-needy people may not realize they are eligible for benefits, and it takes time to apply. Additionally, benefits are set to cover gaps between what it is estimated the household could afford and its estimated needs, which may not reflect the household's actual unmet needs. Also, some people who are eligible for government benefits do not want to take advantage of them.

Thus, various types of social-economy organizations -- churches and other religious organizations, private nonprofit groups, community centers, and various other community programs -- operate frontline food-assistance programs, which fall into three categories. *Food pantries* distribute food (primarily packaged) and other grocery products to needy people in their communities, where the latter then prepare the food wherever they live. *Soup kitchens* provide prepared meals to the needy on their own premises. *Emergency shelters* have the dual purpose of giving temporary shelter to people without it, and offering them one or two meals during their stay; examples include homeless shelters, shelters for victims of domestic violence, and temporary shelters for people with substance abuse problems. It is estimated that food pantries serve the largest number of clients over the course of the year: for example, in 2009, it is estimated that 35 million people acquired food from a food pantry, 2.1 million from a soup kitchen, and 1.6 million from an emergency shelter (Mathematica Policy Research 2010: 44).

Of critical importance in provisioning the frontline programs with sufficient food is the system's wholesale backbone, consisting of the large nonprofit organization, Feeding America (previously America's Second Harvest), which collects food donations from companies and distributes them to regional food banks, which in turn distribute them to frontline programs. Food pantries receive about three-quarters of the food they distribute from food banks; for soup kitchens and shelters, the shares are about one-half and two-fifths respectively. What makes the system constitute a 'system' is the extraordinary work done by Feeding America and its partner organizations, to collect food and move it quickly and efficiently to outlets with demonstrated capacity to get it to those in need. This entails: identifying and cultivating potential sources of food donations; finding ways to make donations advantageous to companies that produce, distribute, and/or serve food; transporting, storing and delivering food to food banks at maximum efficiency; investing in capital equipment and technologies that increase the efficiency of the distribution network; dealing only with food banks having

infrastructure and personnel capable of making full use of food donations; working continually to build knowledge of hunger in America; and soliciting financial donations for capital projects. To the economist's eye, what is striking is that -- contrary to the assumption that monetary incentives are required to motivate people and organizations to maximize returns to scarce productive resources -- the emergency-food system's efficiency is driven by an overriding *intrinsic* motivation to minimize unmet needs for food. This underlines the false dichotomies put forth in debates about public versus private provision of social services: in plenty of cases, it is not a shortage of pecuniary incentives that causes public-sector inefficiencies, but rather too little sense of the intrinsic value of one's work (e.g. Valentinov 2007).

Table 7 shows how the emergency-food system ramped up between 2005 and 2009, as the U.S. economy shifted from healthy expansion to deep recession. Consistent with expectations, three-quarters of all food pantries reported that the number of clients they served had increased in the previous three years; comparable shares for soup kitchens and shelters were 65.4 percent and 54.5 percent respectively. Capacity in all three types of programs expanded over the period: the number of food pantries rose from 18,436 to 23,842; the number of soup kitchens from 4,514 to 6,064; and the number of shelters from 2,704 to 3,728. Much of this growth came from secular nonprofit organizations; in all three areas, the share of programs run by religious organizations slipped. Volunteer labor was clearly important in handling increased volumes of emergency food, especially for food-pantries where two-thirds of programs have no paid workers at all. This is consistent with national statistics on volunteering which show that, while the share of people age 16+ who did some volunteering in the previous year did not change much between 2007 and 2009, among those volunteering, the share whose main activity was to collect, prepare, distribute and/or serve food rose from 9.2 to 10.3 percent (Table 8). The shift towards food-related volunteering came especially from people working full- or part-time; among the unemployed (who anyway volunteer at lower rates), there was no such shift. This suggests that, as the recession deepened, working people sought out ways to help those in need.

A similar picture comes from examining sources of the food distributed by frontline agencies. Shares of food acquired through food banks hardly changed between 2005 and 2009, consistent with direct reports of increased supplies of food acquired and distributed through Feeding America over the period.⁷ Thus, there is no special evidence that grocery chains, food producers, or other companies producing basic household staples trimmed back margins of unsold food to get through tough times. At the same time, the steady shares of food coming through congregations, local food drives, and donations from local merchants imply that their volumes also rose, again suggesting important efforts within local social and business circles to respond to rising unmet needs of others.

⁷ See, e.g. Feeding America (2009).

How well did the emergency-food system do in accommodating needs for food left unmet through money incomes, support of friends and family, and government programs? Available data suggest that, as well as the system did in mobilizing extra resources, it was able only partly to accommodate rising unmet needs for food. As shown in Table 9, many frontline agencies had to make adjustments in their programs to deal with increased demand and found themselves stretched thin. Thus, the share of food pantries saying they sometimes or often had to reduce the size of the food package due to lack of food rose from 18.1 percent in 2005 to 24.8 percent in 2009, while the share of emergency shelters saying they had to reduce portion size rose from 6.2 to 10.1 percent. In 2009, about 25 percent of food pantries and 10 percent of soup kitchens said they had to turn people away due to lack of food and/or ineligibility issues (which include limits on the frequency of getting food from the program). In other words, the means used to cope with excess demand for emergency food is *rationing* according to defined measures of need: while criteria vary from outlet to outlet, they generally aim to *share* available food among those who need it, using rules intended to be fair (e.g. limits on the number of visits per month, distributions confined to residents of the area, portion sizes based on household size, etc.). This underlines that, even if the emergency food system has been highly effective in responding to unmet needs created by the recession, the conditions under which it operates -- of constant scramble to mobilize resources to operate at right levels relative to need -- imply constant challenges navigated by a critical pool of people driven by the ethic of care. Given the difficulties this implies, it is perhaps not surprising that two-thirds of all food pantries and soup kitchens and almost three-quarters of all shelters viewed their futures as uncertain, due to problems with funding, adequate food supplies, and/or staffing.

What do people who receive emergency-food assistance think about what they receive and how they receive it? As Table 9 shows, large majorities of recipients are generally satisfied with the amount, variety and quality of food they receive, although somewhat less so at shelters than at pantries and kitchens. Equally important from the point of view of basic needs is that roundabouts 90 percent of people visiting pantries and kitchens said they were treated with respect by staff always or most of the time; while for shelters this number was lower at 87.2 percent in 2009, it was up from 84 percent in 2005. This reflects the clear, strong and widespread commitment among emergency-food providers to treating the people they serve with consistent dignity and respect. Thus, many adopt some code of ethics that governs their interactions with the people they serve. One such code is the “Code of Ethical Principles and Standards of Professional Practice” of the Association of Fundraising Professionals (AFP) which requires members to “treat all people with dignity and respect”, “foster cultural diversity and pluralistic values”, “demonstrate concern for the interests and well being of individuals affected by their actions”, and “value the privacy, freedom of choice and interests of all those affected by their actions.” Similarly, the Code of Ethics of Catholic Charities USA stipulates that “each person served

and engaged with our work will be held in great esteem and with great respect”, and that “decisions should ... involve those who are capable of participation in decision-making and who will be impacted by those decisions, and should empower those who are most in need” (Catholic Charities USA 2007: 8-9). As such, emergency food-relief agencies generally aim to integrate the basic need for dignity and agency in the conduct of their work.

Discussion and implications

On balance, the evidence suggests that the emergency food subsector of the needs-based social economy responded fairly strongly and effectively to rising unmet needs for food during the recession of 2007-09 -- showing that, just as prospects for earning abnormal profits pull resources into production of commercial goods, imperatives of meeting needs pull resources into the social economy when the economy turns down. That concern for the needs of others is central in explaining this response is suggested by findings which are out of line with incentive-based predictions of how the social economy would respond. For example, companies' donations of unsold food did not drop off as the recession deepened, but rather held steady or rose. Private financial donations may have fallen off as asset prices dropped, but they fell by less than they did in other nonprofit sectors, suggesting a diversion of funding into needs-oriented work. Volunteering rose, but it was employed people, not the newly unemployed, who intensified their involvement in needs-oriented work. These findings underline that, despite the dominance of commercial values in the contemporary U.S. economy, a widely held *ethic of care* provides an appreciable, if not fully sufficiently, countervailing force to rising deficits in basic needs.

The case of emergency food highlights some important features of the social economy and ways in which it differs from private and government economic activity. First, in common with private business activity, there is an important element of entrepreneurship in the needs-oriented social economy, with its principals needing to constantly troll for new sources of financing or donations, new strategic partnerships, new operating methods, etc. to better meet the needs of people it aims to help. This highlights that 'pecuniary motives' are not the only drive behind welfare-increasing changes in the production and distribution of goods and services, and/or in the types of goods and services produced, even if they tend to be emphasized in economic definitions of entrepreneurship. Rather, intrinsic and pro-social motives can also be of critical importance in activities where primary objectives concern helping others, especially when it comes to addressing unmet needs. But second, *unlike* private business activity, innovation in the social economy can also take the form of building structures and establishing practices that coordinate activities across organizations, making their joint product higher than it would be if each operated alone. The wholesale backbone provided by Feeding America is an obvious example: by acting as the central coordinator of food donations and the distribution of food among regional food banks, Feeding America is able to mobilize quantities and qualities of food much

above what smaller organizations could mobilize on their own and store and distribute supplies at lower cost. Another example concerns the rules used by regional food banks to determine which food pantries and kitchens with which to do business; typically, to ensure that the food they provide goes expeditiously to people who really need it, they will only partner with outlets that maintain regular, decently-equipped operations and run at sufficient scale with sufficient professionalism to make good use of emergency food supplies. These kinds of coordinating structures may be more important in the emergency-food system, versus subsectors of the social economy aiming to address unmet needs for shelter and health care -- but the latter too could benefit from creating new structures and practices for solving problems collectively, for example, by bargaining jointly with companies that supply goods and services they need to carry out their work.

This brings us back to the criticism that the emergency-food system and the needs-oriented social economy more generally reflect a social deficiency rather than social strength -- because no matter how effective and efficient they may be in addressing unmet needs in the short-term, they cannot do much to tackle underlying causes of inadequate access to food, shelter and health care among disadvantaged people and instead leave them chronically dependent on the kindness of strangers. While this criticism is valid as far as it goes, it fails to situate the problem in context, making it hard to see what to do about it. On one hand, considerations of human agency and dignity mean that long-run solutions to eliminating unmet needs are not a matter of raising the generosity of government programs (food stamps, housing vouchers, etc.) -- because people perpetually dependent on the public dole are not able to work and participate in social life on an equal footing with others. Rather, eliminating unmet needs would require sustained and substantial efforts to improve the abilities of disadvantaged people to earn decent livelihoods, live in decent communities, provide their children with decent educations, etc. On the other hand, the urgent character of unmet basic needs implies that it will always seem imperative to allocate additional resources to covering presently unmet needs, rather than investing them in programs that would bring down the prevalence of unmet needs in the long-run. This is similar to the problem of time inconsistency in hyperbolic discounting models: because consumption today is worth so much more than an equivalent amount of consumption tomorrow, too little will always set aside to cover future consumption, relative to an allocation that would be optimal in the long-run. Thus, the fact that the needs-oriented social economy does 'too little' about eliminating root causes of unmet needs reflects an inevitable tension in its position -- which is unlikely to be overcome without mechanisms that enforce commitment to a sustained and substantial flow of resources to the long-run project.

One can point to two potentially valuable mechanisms in this regard. The first concerns work-integration programs, which have become important vehicles for reducing poverty and disadvantage in Europe and Canada (Borzaga and Defourny 2001) and are increasing in importance in the U.S. In general, work-integration programs are situated in pro-social businesses that create structured

employment opportunities for disadvantaged people, providing them with training, skills, and experience as well as a basic wage, enabling them to eventually transition into better jobs for which they have become qualified. Examples include the FareStart program in Seattle, which runs a 16-week culinary program for adults that includes hands-on and classroom training in food service as well as life-skills classes intended to build self-sufficiency; the Pine Street Inn's 'Boston Handiworks' program, which offers people exiting from homelessness an 11-week intensive course in basic skills of carpentry, painting, plumbing, and other areas; the Greyston Bakery in New York, for which the motto is "We don't hire people to bake brownies, we bake brownies to hire people"; and Homeboy Industries of Los Angeles, which (among other things) trains former gang members to install solar panels.⁸ Such programs effectively combine funds for covering unmet basic needs with investments in human capital and capabilities, improving people's prospects for earning decent livelihoods in the long run. However, the relatively complex combinations of financing on which they depend (donations, government grants, revenues generated by the business) make their operations vulnerable to changing economic and financial conditions. Thus, for example, the recession and fiscal crisis in California caused grants and donations to Homeboy Industries to dry up, requiring lay-offs of 300 paid staff and substantial cutbacks in programs (Becerra 2010). This highlights the seemingly more 'discretionary' element of programs that tackle root causes of unmet needs, versus those which address them in the short-run.

Thus, a second possible mechanism to guard against underinvestment in human capital and capabilities concerns setting up mechanisms to stabilize inflows of funding for social-economy work. Needs-oriented social-economy organizations in effect have to scale their activities up or down according to both the scale of the problems they aim to address and inflows of financial and other resources. Although they can redouble their appeals for resources in the face of rising needs, they are usually not able to build up assets when inflows are high so they have reserves that could be drawn down when inflows drop off, not only because of the urgency of addressing unmet needs in the short-run, but also because organizations that do not make timely use of funds look to donors like they have governance and management problems rather than prudent fiscal practices (e.g. Fisman and Hubbard 2003). Thus, in situations like that faced by Homeboy, long-term programs have to be cut back when funding drops, so that progress in helping people exit from gang-centered lives is both fitful and pro-cyclical. Here too there are likely to be advantages from creating new institutions and practices to help attenuate these problems. For example, following the example of the emergency-food system, it could be beneficial for needs-oriented organizations running work-integration programs to join together to form coordinating committees within their metropolitan area. These could undertake tasks that could be more efficiently conducted jointly (e.g. funding-raising, identifying and working with employers willing to hire people exiting from work-integration programs). They could also establish clear rules and practices for financial management and reporting, and set up and run boards that periodically review the finances

⁸ See Jordon (2009).

and operations of individual organizations and certify whether they meet agreed-upon standards. Greater transparency, oversight, and commitment to good financial practices may increase the ability of individual organizations to build up buffer stocks of funds in good times that can be used to keep programs going when aggregate conditions decline.

A final point concerns the issue of human dignity and dependence on social assistance for meeting basic needs, as happens for people whose incomes are chronically too low to cover basic aspects of material living standards. In the philosophical, ethical and religious frameworks discussed above, people in this situation -- even if they can obtain sufficient supplies of food, shelter, and health care -- still have unmet basic needs, in the sense that their dependence on the beneficence of others implies lack of agency and inability to participate in social and economic life on an equal footing with others. Certainly this is a reason to tackle the root causes of unmet needs. But it also suggests the importance within the needs-oriented social economy of structuring projects so that the 'helped' are not passively dependent on and subject to the social preferences of the 'helpers'. As discussed, this point is widely recognized in the needs-oriented social economy, with many organizations already following codes of conduct or ethics obligating them to treat those they seek to help as equals deserving of dignity and respect. Still, this idea at times is left in the domain of respectful treatment by the 'helpers' of the 'helped', which is fundamentally important but not the same as accepting and promoting people's agency and capabilities. In this respect, broader incorporation of practices like community-based research (in which people from communities having unmet needs help conduct research identifying best ways to address them) and having members of disadvantaged groups participate in the governance of organizations working to improve their lots would be beneficial for reducing qualitative, as well as quantitative, dimensions of unmet needs in the long-run.

Table 1. Conceptualizations of basic needs and social responsibility for meeting them				
Maslow's hierarchy	Nussbaum's 10 capabilities	Islamic Thought	Catholic Social Thought	Secular rights approaches
<p>Physiological: oxygen, food, water, and a relatively constant body temperature</p> <p>Safety</p> <p>Belongingness, love, and affection (giving and receiving)</p> <p>Esteem: self-esteem and the esteem of others</p> <p>Self-actualization: a person's need to be and do that which the person was "born to do."</p>	<p>Life of normal length</p> <p>Bodily health: adequate food and shelter</p> <p>Bodily integrity: freedom from assault, freedom of movement</p> <p>Ability to think and reason cultivated by education</p> <p>Full emotional life w/satisfying emotional attachments</p> <p>Ability to conceptualize the good, engage in critical reflection</p> <p>Ability to be treated with dignity by others</p> <p>Ability to respect and live with concern for animals, plants and nature</p> <p>Ability to laugh, play, enjoy recreational activities</p> <p>Ability to participate politically, hold property, secure employment on equal basis with others</p>	<p><i>Five Basic Necessities of life (darurat or dharuriat):</i></p> <p>Physical self: basic items needed to lead a purposeful life (food, clothing, shelter, transport, health etc.)</p> <p>Religion: ability to practice one's religion; for Muslims, the ability to perform the five pillars.</p> <p>Intellect or Knowledge: ability to acquire knowledge, develop one's mind and reasoning power</p> <p>Family Life and Offspring: ability to marry and raise a family</p> <p>Wealth: ability to earn a livelihood, own and maintain property related thereto</p>	<p><i>All people have inviolable rights to:</i></p> <p>Bodily integrity and means for proper development: food, clothing, shelter, medical care, rest</p> <p>Social security: care in the event of ill-health, disability, widowhood, unemployment, loss of livelihood through no fault of one's own</p> <p>Good education</p> <p>Freedom to choose one's profession</p> <p>Respect and a good name</p> <p>Freedom to investigate the truth, be informed about public events</p> <p>Freedom of speech and publication</p>	<p><i>U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 25(1)</i></p> <p>"Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing, and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control."</p>
	<p>"In some form all [of the above] are held to be part of a minimum account of social justice: a society that does not guarantee these to all its citizens, at some appropriate threshold level, falls short of being a fully just society, whatever its level of opulence"</p>	<p>Those with means have obligations to help meet the needs of the poor through alms-giving and other morally-oriented individual and collective action</p> <p>Unmet needs may reflect deficiencies of values within society that ought to be changed</p> <p>The state should address needs unmet by private individual and collective action</p>	<p><i>Principle of subsidiarity:</i> "To protect basic justice, gov't should undertake only those initiatives which exceed the capacities of individuals or private groups acting independently. Gov't should not replace or destroy smaller communities and individual initiative. Rather it should help them contribute more effectively to social well-being and supplement their activity when the demands of justice exceed their capacities"</p>	<p>Governments have duties to respect and uphold human rights. Individuals have responsibilities as voters and citizens to promote rights in their own country. Help from private voluntary organizations is welcome, but unlikely to provide widespread access to basic needs in the way that governments can. Wealthy countries surely have resources adequate for protecting rights to basic needs.</p>
Sources: Maslow (1943), Nussbaum (1999: 41-42; 2006: 7), Goolam (2006), Pope John XXIII (1963), U.S. Catholic Bishops (1986), Nickell (2005).				

Table 2. Indicators of the size of the needs-based social economy		
Hunger and food insecurity	Food banks, food pantries, soup kitchens, food served at shelters	33,600 programs, providing food for an estimated 37 million people per year
Shelter	Homeless shelters, temporary housing for victims of domestic abuse, halfway houses for people transitioning from institutional settings, transitional housing for refugees	Homeless shelters: 614,042 year-round beds Shelters for victims of domestic violence: 1,950*
Health care	Free clinics, mobile clinics that serve the homeless	Community health centers: Provided free or low-cost care to 16 million patients in 2007

Sources: Mathematica Policy Research (2010), U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (2009), National Network to End Domestic Violence (2007), National Association of Community Health Centers (2009).

Table 4. Access to consumption support and health insurance

	% of HHs receiving food stamps		% of households receiving cash assistance		% of people covered by health insurance:				% of newly unemployed workers filing for UI benefits	
					Employer-provided		Government program			
	2007	2008	2007	2008	2007	2008	2007	2008	2007	2009
All	7.7	8.6	2.4	2.3	59.3	58.5	27.8	29.0	36.3	40.0
By race/ethnicity of person or householder:										
Black	18.7	20.3	n.a.	n.a.	49.1	48.3	35.2	37.5	n.a.	n.a.
Non-Hispanic white	5.2	5.9	n.a.	n.a.	65.6	64.8	26.7	27.5	n.a.	n.a.
Hispanic	12.6	14.1	n.a.	n.a.	40.3	40.2	28.3	30.4	n.a.	n.a.

Sources: See Appendix.

Table 5. Insecurity in access to food and health care

	% of HHs experiencing some food insecurity in past yr.		% of HHs with very low food security in past yr.		% of adults in fair or poor self-reported health		% of persons who didn't get or delayed getting medical care in past 12 mos. due to concerns about cost	
	2007	2008	2007	2008	2007	2008	2007	2008
All	11.1	14.6	4.1	5.7	13.0	12.8	13.5	15.5
By race/ethnicity of person or householder								
Black	22.2	25.7	7.7	10.1	19.3	18.4	14.1	17.5
Non-Hispanic white	7.9	10.7	3.1	4.5	11.6	11.5	13.5	15.3
Hispanic	20.1	26.9	6.6	8.8	17.3	17.4	14.4	17.4

Notes: See Appendix for data sources. Households are classified as “food insecure” if at some time during the past year they were uncertain of having, or unable to acquire, enough food to meet the needs of all their members due to insufficient money or other resources for food. Their food security is classified as “very low” if “at times during the year, the food intake of household members was reduced and their normal eating patterns disrupted because the household lacked money and other resources for food.”

Table 6. Inadequate access to shelter

[illegible]

Table 7. Profile of frontline food-assistance programs

	Food pantries		Soup kitchens		Shelters	
	2005	2009	2005	2009	2005	2009
Total # of programs	18,436	23,842	4,514	6,064	2,704	3,728
% of programs serving an increased # of clients in the previous 3 yrs.	-	74.3	-	65.4	-	54.4
Distribution of programs by type (%)						
Religious organization	73.6	71.6	64.7	61.8	43.1	39.2
Other private nonprofit	18.3	19.6	27.9	29.1	50.1	51.0
Government	2.3	2.0	2.5	2.3	1.8	2.3
Community Action Program (CAP)	3.2	2.6	1.8	1.8	1.6	2.4
Other community programs	2.6	4.2	3.0	5.0	3.4	5.1
Use of volunteers:						
% of agencies using volunteers	89.1	92.6	86.4	87.1	71.4	71.8
% of agencies staffed only by volunteers	66.2	67.7	40.5	42.0	10.8	15.3
Avg. # of volunteers	5	6	7	8	9	9
Sources of food:						
% of total food acquired from a food bank	74.2	75.5	49.0	49.6	41.5	41.1
% of programs receiving food from:						
Religious congregation	76.2	80.6	58.7	64.4	56.2	58.1
Federal govt. food programs*	68.7	59.8	49.4	41.2	45.9	38.1
Food purchased by the agency	53.9	58.0	74.9	75.1	81.4	81.4
Local food drives (e.g. Boy Scouts)	49.9	54.5	27.2	31.9	40.3	40.7
Local merchant or farmer donations	40.8	46.3	45.8	48.2	45.0	49.0

Source: Mathematica Policy Research (2010: 349).

* Commodity Supplemental Food Program (CSFP), The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP).

Table 8. Engagement in volunteering, people aged 16+ years

	% who volunteered for or through an organization in the past yr.		% of those who volunteer whose main activity was to collect, prepare, distribute and/or serve food	
	2007	2009	2007	2009
All	26.2	26.8	9.2	10.3
By labor-market status:				
Working full-time	26.9	28.7	7.9	8.8
Working part-time	35.4	33.7	8.7	11.2
Unemployed	23.2	22.9	9.8	9.8
Out of the labor force	22.3	22.6	11.9	12.6
By race/ethnicity:				
Black	18.2	20.2	10.3	12.0
White	27.9	28.3	9.0	10.0
Hispanic	13.5	14.7	9.8	10.7
Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics (2010).				

Table 9. Agencies' problems accommodating needs for food & people's satisfaction with the food they receive

	Food pantries		Soup kitchens		Emergency shelters	
	2005	2009	2005	2009	2005	2009
Agencies' problems						
% of programs that, during the previous yr., had to reduce size of food package or portion due to lack of food 'sometime' or 'often'	18.1	24.8	9.4	11.8	6.2	10.1
% of programs that had to turn people away in the past yr. due to lack of food and/or ineligibility issues given the program's rules*	-	26.6	-	9.9	-	43.3
% of programs with uncertain futures due to problems that threaten their continued existence (e.g. funding, staffing problems, adequate food supplies)	-	66.6	-	67.3	-	73.0
People's satisfaction with food assistance they receive						
% of people 'very' or 'somewhat' satisfied with the food they received in terms of:						
Amount	92.6	92.5	92.7	92.1	83.7	85.6
Variety	90.7	91.1	89.4	89.2	78.7	79.0
Quality	93.9	94.0	91.6	90.3	82.9	81.2
% of people who said they were treated with respect by the staff always or most of time	91.6	90.7	91.0	89.0	84.2	87.2

Source: Mathematica Policy Research (2010: 226, 271).

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Appendix: Data sources for Tables

Table 3

Unemployment rate: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey, Q4 of each year (seasonally adjusted). <http://ftp.bls.gov/pub/suppl/empst.cpsed2.txt>

Poverty rates: U.S. Census Bureau and Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current population survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplements. <http://www.census.gov/prod/2009pubs/p60-236.pdf>

Table 4

Unemployment insurance (UI): U.S. Department of Labor, Unemployment Insurance Chartbook. <http://www.doleta.gov/unemploy/chartbook.cfm>.

Food stamps and cash assistance: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey.

Health insurance coverage: U.S. Census Bureau and Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current population survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplements. <http://www.census.gov/prod/2009pubs/p60-236.pdf>

Table 5

Food insecurity: U.S. Census Bureau, Bureau of Labor Statistics, and U.S. Department of Agriculture, Current population survey, annual Food Security Supplement (CPS-FSS).

Self-reported health, deferral of needed health care: Centers for Disease Control, National Health Interview Survey, Series 10 reports, Nos. 238, 240, 242, 243. Available at: http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nhis/nhis_series.htm.

Table 6

All figures from U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, "2008 Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress," using data from the Homeless Management Information System (July 2009). <http://www.hudhre.info/documents/4thHomelessAssessmentReport.pdf>