

# ADDRESSING FOOD INSECURITY IN ISRAEL

by Elaine Cohen

In October 2005 I received a life changing call from an intriguing woman. That call opened the door to an incredible journey.

The call was from Laurie Heller, the volunteer co-chair of the Forum to Address Food Insecurity in Israel. The Forum is an informal gathering of philanthropists who, at Laurie's instigation, decided to pull together to create social change through improving food security and nutrition in Israel. Immediately after my talk with Laurie, the phone rang again. It was Cheri Fox, the Forum's partner co-chair, who called to fill in some more details. They said they had been working towards reducing food insecurity in Israel, and wanted to hire a business consultant to drive the project forward.

My job on this project was to assess the feasibility of a more efficient and systemic national effort to reduce food insecurity, and to provide a business plan for the selected approach. This required an in-depth analysis of the current landscape of food insecurity support in Israel and an informed assessment of what would be possible. The visionary model before our eyes was that of America's Second Harvest, the U.S.'s national food-banking network.

Here was the Catch 22: In order to confirm feasibility, we needed the buy-in of a key stakeholder group – the hundreds of food assistance organizations currently distributing food in Israel. Of course to gain buy-in, we needed a proposal to buy into. And yet, to develop a sensible proposal we needed the input of those organizations that would have to buy in! So our journey required the development of an intensive, interactive process of dialogue and engagement with a diverse group commonly characterized by their lack of intra-collaborative ability.

One of the first people I met on this journey was Eric Schockman, president of MAZON, who was visiting Israel in support of the Forum. I found him to be inspiring and highly encouraging, an example of the kind of guiding light that we would need on this project.

Let's start with some facts. In a study conducted by the Myers-Brookdale Institute

on Food Insecurity in 2003, food insecurity in Israel was found to affect 22% of the population, twice the level assessed in the same period in the U.S. Since then, there have been several governmental cutbacks in social benefits, which have exacerbated the levels of food insecurity in Israel. The amount of food needed to drive out food insecurity is, we calculate conservatively, 310,000 pounds of food per year. Currently, food supplied annually by a wide variety of independent food assistance organizations is 55,000 pounds, less than 20% of the need. Our assessment is that this can be doubled within two years and tripled within five years, through leveraging the common collective effort of all the current organizations engaged in food distribution AND providing an enabling infrastructure to serve as a springboard for collaboration.



The delegation of Israeli NGO's at a meeting at America's Second Harvest. *l to r:* Dudi Zilbershlag, Chris Rebstock, Bob Forney, Elaine Cohen, El Wohlfiler, Laurie Heller, Daniel Schwartz and Gilad Harish.

Completing this assessment was no small task. Almost all of the experts and knowledgeable people in the field were saying, "It can't be done! Collaboration is not possible. Too many egos, too many different interests, too complicated a mission." And the food assistance organizations themselves were saying, "We want to collaborate," but insisting that, "the others won't!"

We started off on our journey in January 2006, after the Forum had raised funds with the help of MAZON and other generous donors.

First, we collected data. We gathered information from Israel's 20 highest volume food assistance organizations, which supply over 60% of food to the food insecure.

Then we analyzed our data and reached conclusions about future possibilities, which showed that potential food sources could be exploited much more effectively and efficiently.

Next, we shared our data with the food assistance organizations, engaging them in the vision – a vision we brought closer by taking a small delegation of food assistance organizations to visit America's Second Harvest to see the food banking operation at its best. And finally, with the help of Programa, a company in Israel that volunteered its services, we created a template for a five-year physical food bank and logistics operation.

As I write this, we are continuing the dialogue through discussions on what collaboration actually means for each and every one of the food assistance organizations. We are close to finalizing our business plan and template for a five-year plan with a high degree of confidence of buy-in.

All those involved now see what is possible: the potential for a national effort to address food security in Israel characterized by a highly efficient food distribution operation, as well as capacity building and advocacy activities to support the ability of food assistance organizations to reach more food insecure people and to raise and engage governmental and public awareness.

We still have a long road ahead. But we have traveled the most difficult part of the journey. As we stop to draw breath, we are able to see clearly that dreams can become reality. And our reality is that every citizen of Israel should have access to enough nutritious food to sustain healthy and productive life.

We shall keep journeying until we achieve this reality. •

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