

## Israel Food Banking Project Status Report

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I traveled to Israel the first week of December to work with our friends and partners at the Forum to Address Food Insecurity and Poverty in Israel (Forum). They are in the final phase of an ambitious project designed to promote a fuller understanding of hunger in Israel and to identify opportunities that would provide additional sources of food, improve and expand distribution efficiencies, and reach approximately 400 independent social service organizations called “amutot” working to fight food insecurity in Israel. While in Israel, we visited several of the amutots who work every day to assist a growing number of people who lack commercial access to adequate supplies of food. We also visited political leaders, food industry executives and Jewish philanthropic organizations and Knesset members to discuss food insecurity and food banking in Israel.

### BACKGROUND

Our partnership and work with the Forum began approximately a year ago. With funding support from MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger, The Global FoodBanking Network (GFN) has consulted with the Forum advising them through an organizational planning and development process toward the creation of a national network of food banks. During this past year the Forum has been successful in:

- measuring the extent of hunger in Israel
- assessing the current processes to secure food
- identifying the capacity of the existing Israeli amutots to deliver food to those in need.

We believe that the Forum has developed a solid plan to guide the implementation of a national food banking system – the Israel Food Bank Network -- that can provide significant assistance to social service organizations that deliver food and grocery products and agricultural surplus to Israelis who face food insecurity.

### GROWING POVERTY AND FOOD INSECURITY

The overall poverty rate in Israel is almost double that of the U.S. (23.6% compared to 12.6%) and the child hunger rate is among the highest of any developed country in the world. According to “Table to Table”, Israel’s major food rescue organization feeding the food insecure, 400,000 Israeli families suffer from nutritional food insecurity. Those experiencing nutritional insecurity eat smaller portions, skip meals and, in extreme cases, don’t eat for a whole day. Diets may be high in carbohydrates and lacking or almost devoid of meat, dairy products, vegetables and fruit. In Israel, according to Table to Table, 22% of families are moderately nutritionally insecure and 8% suffer from severe nutritional insecurity.

The high rate of poverty in Israel is more recently caused by significant demographic changes as well as a retreat of government support due to the costs of war, geopolitical turmoil and terrorism. Increasing numbers of the Bedouin population, after years of desert agrarian living, have migrated to the urban areas in Israel in search of jobs and economic opportunity. There have been extremely large numbers of new immigrant populations into Israel as well and guest work programs also putting pressure on the job market. The “War in the North” caused an estimated one million people to

evacuate their homes in northern Israel moving south in search of safety. Consequently, the war has placed serious additional demands on the limited private funds that have historically been available to assist in the fight against hunger in the North, Central and South of Israel.

Again, the paradox of food insecurity amid a land of plenty is found in Israel as it is in the U.S. and other developed countries. While hundreds of thousands of people have too little to eat surplus agricultural production is being plowed under in the fields. At the same time, Israeli feeding organizations like Table to Table and Letet face difficult challenges. Approximately 55 percent of the food that is distributed by social service organizations is currently being purchased. This percentage of purchased food among food banks in Israel is significantly higher than found in the U.S. and other food banking countries, which is more typically in the 5 to 10 percent range. Consequently, in Israel the ability of private funds to leverage food supplies is significantly less than in other countries.

During the course of our work, we have talked with private sector leaders of the agriculture and grocery products industries and have heard that there are significant additional surpluses that could be directed to meet the need of these people. We also believe that these business organizations and farmers will welcome and support the development and the operation of the Israel Food Bank Network as an important new partner.

#### PUBLIC SECTOR SUPPORT INADEQUATE

Unfortunately, the government of Israel does not provide the type of federal government food assistance support that is typically available in other developed countries. Again, the costs of war and fighting terrorism have strained Federal government resources leaving less for social welfare programs. Nonetheless, we agree with the Forum that it is time to ask for additional support from the Israel Federal Government. Support that would create an environment where private sector donations would be encouraged is important. As such, the growth in direct Federal assistance should include:

- Providing liability protection for food donors who practice reasonable food safety standards associated with their donations;
- Providing tax incentives to businesses who donate food. (Currently these tax deductions are set at a level that we believe is too low, especially for the larger businesses for which tax benefits have been capped);
- Eliminating or reducing the 15.9% VAT tax that non-for-profit agencies have to pay for the purchase of food that they distribute;
- Encouraging dramatically expanded utilization of surplus agricultural products that can not be sold at adequate market prices.

We also agree with the Forum that additional Federal government support for school lunch programs and food for after school enrichment programs is needed. Today these programs are largely supported by the good work of the Sacta Rashi Foundation.

In addition to meeting with Ali Alaluf, President of Sacta Rashi Foundation, we met with Yuli Tamir, Knesset member and Minister of Education, and with Michael Melchior, also a member of the Knesset and Chairperson of the Knesset Education Committee. We were encouraged to find in our conversations with government and business leaders and community groups that there is a growing awareness of food insecurity, especially among children, and recognition of the need for greater support for food banking and school feeding programs. We believe that an Israeli Food Bank Network can

provide significant policy guidance and information to those leaders and others who understand the need and want to advance food security legislation in the Knesset.

### WORK ACTIVITY AND FEEDING PROGRAMS

Prior to our visit, the Forum staff had completed their food insecurity studies and developed a draft of a Business Plan that would support the implementation of a national Food Bank network for Israel. We were asked to review the draft Business Plan and make suggestions for enhancement where appropriate. We believe that the revised Business Plan provides a clear and compelling case for the development of the Food Bank network.

During our week in Israel two recently completed poverty and food insecurity related studies were released. As a participant in the Letet conference, I witnessed first hand the support of 130 agencies that fight food insecurity every day. It is clear that the Letet study echoes the experience of these agencies adding to the growing body of evidence that food insecurity is increasing in Israel.

A second food insecurity study was completed by Sharon Ouzieley, a Koret Foundation Fellow. Her work identified a significant amount of agriculture surplus that is currently not available to assist food insecure people. The study provides independent information about the amounts of surplus crops that are not harvested. This report will be helpful to the work of many who are committed to gaining access to these surpluses.

It was an honor for me to be asked to help present both studies to more than 130 social service organizations to a number of Knesset members and the public. I met many passionate and dedicated community and business leaders who are very serious about the problem of food insecurity in Israel.

We had an opportunity to visit a few Israeli feeding programs to observe their daily operations. We visited with Abraham Israel, who is the founder and chairman of Hazon Yeshaya (soup kitchen) in Jerusalem, about an hour before the noontime meal. Hundreds of Israel's poor, especially older people, lined the building and court yard waiting patiently (some for hours) in order to be fed for the day. Each had a registration card for the program and newcomers were being registered. The kitchen had one paid chef and a dozen or so volunteers. Abraham told us that they were still sending meals to the north to assist families displaced by war. Their enormous monthly food purchase budget totals \$700,000. Unfortunately, very little of the food for the meals is donated.

Another program we visited, Meir Panim, is named after a young boy and his brother who died of a disease where the child stops eating (essentially starving to death). Their father, Dudi Zilbershlag, has created a restaurant-style feeding program throughout Israel which both feeds the needy and trains the unemployed, much like Community Kitchens in the U.S. We visited a facility that is being converted into a kitchen that will provide work for unemployed Bedouin women to prepare tens of thousands of meals for Bedouin people in need of food.

After visiting Dudi's impressive operation several members of MAZON delegation joined representatives of "Table to Table" to glean several tons of persimmons from an orchard for their food rescue and redistribution program. One of my associates, Augie Fernandez, Executive Director of Detroit Gleaners, shared his experiences of gleaning in the U.S. and learned from their experience. Later that day we met at Pitchon-Lev, another powerful organization that operates a food relief and

counseling program out an underground shopping center parking lot. The founder, Nissim Zioni hosted a meeting of 25 or so agencies to talk about their needs and the planned Food Bank Network.

### GROWING SUPPORT FOR ENDING FOOD INSECURITY

Throughout the week we were able to meet with representatives of more than 150 social service organizations and the leadership of six of the largest Israeli grocery product companies, including Procter & Gamble, Strauss Elite, Shufersal Ltd., and Coca Cola. We also met with Zvi Goldstein, Executive Director of the Food Industries Association, Yossi Rosen, President and CEO of Israel Corp. (one of Israel's largest businesses), five members of the Knesset, the Minister of Education, the former Minister of Agriculture and the leadership of the JDC, UJC and United Israel Appeal. Unlike in the U.S., we had direct private access to a significant number of political leaders, which is a credit to the Forum's leadership, their important work and their credibility. The purpose of each meeting was to provide an update on the work of the Forum and to share our support for their vision of an Israeli Food Bank Network. As we discussed the status of this work and plans for implementation of the Israel Food Bank Network, we also requested support for new food security fighting legislation, more food and financial assistance from both the private and public sectors.

We deeply respect the work of the leadership of the Forum and we are pleased to be their partner. Critical support for the Forum has been provided by MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger, especially their President, H. Eric Schockman and their Board Vice Chairman Joel Jacob, and so many of their associates. MAZON's work to reduce food insecurity in the U.S.A. and Israel is uniquely productive. The Forum has also received early support from the Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation which funds hunger-fighting efforts worldwide and has recently made a generous grant to The Global FoodBanking Network.

In conclusion, the reception and responses that we received throughout the week were extremely positive. While we understand that there is much work to be done, we believe that the Israel Food Bank Network will create an important new capability that can assist the social service that daily labor to provide food for those in need. By mid 2007 the development of the Israel Food Bank Network is expected to be completed.

### December 28, 2006 Follow-up Phone Call with the Forum:

As a result of our meetings in Israel in early December, the Forum is within a few days of finishing their 3-year business plan for the Israel Food Bank Network. They plan to meet with Israel donors in the U.S.A. and around the world beginning the week of February 12<sup>th</sup>. I will be pleased to accompany them where my participation can be helpful. Their goal is to create a Network that will meet the GFN standards for food banking and thereby be attractive to local, national and multi-national food donors in terms of product and financial donations. Knowing that they will meet our membership standards we look forward to welcoming Israel to our global network.

Also, as a result of our visits with Knesset members, two of the members have agreed to re-introduce the "Good Israeli" legislation (like Good Sam in the U.S.) which would provide legal liability protection for food and grocery product donor companies.