

# Food and poverty now: how can we get to a more just food society?

## Community Food & Health Scotland conference 2014

Elizabeth Dowler  
Registered Nutritionist (public health) &  
Professor of Food & Social Policy  
University of Warwick, Coventry  
member Food Ethics Council & Iona Community



# Food poverty now: how can we get to a more just food society?

“A couple had walked eight miles into town this morning to attend an appointment at the Job Centre and did not know how they were going to walk back home with the food we gave them. A local church gave them money for their bus fare home. He had missed an appointment at Job Centre Plus and had benefits sanctioned for four weeks.”

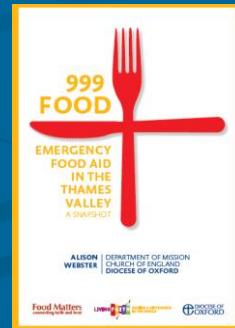
“Sean used to be in the forces. He was left traumatised by war, has lots of problems and is now on his own, estranged from his wife & children. A Royal British Legion welfare officer accompanied him.”

“A pensioner has lost her purse with all her benefit money in it. She has no recourse to funds to pay her bills.”

“Family, two adults and two children, referred by Homestart. Mum has multiple health problems.”

“Karen is a single parent, with two young children. She works as a cleaner and is struggling to stay afloat. Her parents don't help and the father of her children is not around. Since she's come off benefits she's finding it hard to cope with all the bills, and to clothe her children and buy them shoes etc.”

“A woman and her teenage son had left home due to domestic violence, but are being located into temporary accommodation today. They are starting from nothing and waiting for benefits to come through.”



## Food Justice: report of the Food & Fairness Inquiry Food Ethics Council

- social justice left out of food & farming discussions  
Inquiry - 14 members; evidence (100 submissions); expert witnesses, deliberative process  
<http://www.foodethicscouncil.org/society/food-justice.html>
  - **explicit ethical framework:**
    - **fair shares** - equality of outcomes – look at distribution of wellbeing
    - **fair play** – equality of opportunity – look at access to the means of bringing about outcomes
    - **fair say** – autonomy and voice – look at freedom to lead the life I value & influence decisions
- each examined for: food security, sustainability, public health**



## food poverty $\cong$ household food insecurity *no established definition, but...*

- 'being unable to consume an adequate quality or sufficient quantity of food for health, in socially acceptable ways, or the uncertainty that one will be able to do so' (Riches, 1997; Dowler et al, 2001)
- households who have to spend > 10% of annual income on food (Centre for Economics & Business Research, 2013)
- monotonous dull diets, little pleasure, cheap food cheaply prepared
- ✓ *ground in lived experiences - recognising aspirational limits*
- ✓ *needs structural, upstream, not downstream, individual focus*



## know food, nutrition essential for health & wellbeing

- food components
- patterns of eating
  - complexity, meals
  - vegetables, fruits, starchy etc
- outcomes: infectious & chronic disease; deficiency; body size (thinness, obesity) – long term effects
- **wellbeing: valuing food within real human needs (Max Neef) *being, having, doing, interacting***  
<http://www.rainforestinfo.org.au/background/maxneef.htm>



## context: austerity & prices

- retrenchment public & private sector jobs
- wage freeze/ not keeping pace with inflation
- changes to welfare system
  - severe cuts / levels frozen/ caps & sanctions
  - reduction in entitlement; disability
- regional variations in costs and in cuts; housing
- **rising food prices (since 2007/8)**
  - CPI ↑ 17.7% but food prices ↑ 28.2% (Defra)
  - people spend more on food but buy less  
eg vegetable expenditure ↑ 5.3% but consumption ↓ 8%
  - poorest 10% spend almost 24% income on food, richest 14%

some households hit by several different elements of cuts and reforms at once

HIGHLY GENDERED

## comparison consensually defined Minimum Income Standards for different household types

Davis, Hirsch & Padley, 2014  
[www.jrf.org.uk](http://www.jrf.org.uk)

	Single, working age	1-earner couple, 2 children, no childcare	2-earner couple, 2 children, with childcare	Lone parent, 1 child, with childcare
MIS (including rent, childcare* and council tax)	269.06	573.62	735.36	540.06
Gross earnings required	312.30	710.41	778.11	519.21
Annual earnings requirement	16,284	37,043	40,573	27,073
Hourly wage rate	8.33	18.94	10.37	13.85
Amount above the National Minimum Wage, hourly	2.02	12.63	4.06	7.54
Disposable income** on NMW, as % of MIS budget	75%	73%	82%	85%

£ per week	Single, working age	Couple, pensioner	Couple, 2 children	Lone parent, 1 child
MIS excluding rent, 91.5% of council tax* and childcare	184.50	243.29	461.51	275.45
Income Support**/Pension Credit	72.40	230.34	263.81	156.18
Difference (negative number shows shortfall)	-112.10	-12.95	-197.70	-119.27
Benefit income as % of MIS	39%	95%	57%	57%

with wage income

with out of work benefits

## how do people manage to eat?

- budgeting strategies: shopping, cooking and eating differently
  - ask friends and family; buy cheaper food, buy poorer quality food; grow more food; reduce variety (can't afford to experiment); borrow to buy food; go without food (Hosseini et al 2011; Goode, 2012; Dowler 1997; Dowler et al 2007; 2011; Kneafsey et al, 2012)
- practices and mechanisms: many ways to manage inadequate incomes & conditions of deprivation: juggling bills, borrow, sell, go without (illegal)
- turn to charitable sources for help with food – 'food aid' emergency assistance'

## 'food assistance or aid'

- set of measures that provide access to adequate, safe and nutritious food for vulnerable populations (Food Assistance Convention (United Nations 2012))
- delivered through different 'providers' & 'modalities'
- 'providers': formal and informal
  - formal: national, institutionalised measures (e.g. welfare regimes based on social contracts between governments and citizens)
  - informal: measures initiated, managed, implemented by an non-state actors, faith-based organisations, community institutions and other charities, to complement formal, public safety net system
- increasingly a mixture of the two (Gentilini, 2013)

### types of Food Assistance or Aid

Food Stamps or Vouchers	eligible individuals or households: entitles to purchase food at below market price, or obtain a food ration. e.g. Healthy Start
Food provided as part of community care	distributed to people in own homes, may be free to users. e.g. 'Meals on Wheels'
Food Banks	initiatives providing parcels of food to take away and prepare/eat at home (cf 'food pantry')
Building-based food provision	food prepared and eaten on-site. e.g. day centres, lunch clubs. (day care nurseries out of scope)
Non-building based food provision	food provided (hot or cold) for people to take away. e.g. drop-in centres; soup runs
Institutional Feeding (most commonly through schools)	meals at midday or breakfast, or one commodity e.g. milk; free or subsidized
Supplementary Feeding (babies, toddlers, mothers)	food usually of particular kind (e.g. high energy, high protein, micronutrient rich), eaten in addition to the usual diet.
Emergency feeding	refugee camps, following natural disaster, conflict or part of development aid
Food Rations	generic distribution, usually of fixed amounts of food commodities; eligibility defined by government, aid-giving body or other institution.
Food-for-work	people doing specific job are paid in food, usually to take to their homes (e.g. sacks of flour, cans of oil).

## Household food security: a review of Food Aid

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/food-aid-research-report> (Lambie-Mumford, Crossley, Jensen, Verbeke, Dowler, 2014, for Defra)

- *Rapid Evidence Assessment* Feb-March 2013
  - who asking for such help, how and why
  - rapid, systematic literature (UK & international) review, brief case studies, expert workshop

### *findings*

- most literature international – useful experiences
- diverse initiatives offering food to people in need - food banks, meal projects, soups runs, food vouchers, community care (home meals)

### *findings cont..*

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/food-aid-research-report>

- some long-standing; many new; not all food banks or emergency relief
- little systematic documentation of UK initiatives
- Trussell Trust best-known national network; many independent initiatives exist (food banks & other projects) but hard to document
- numbers of people being helped difficult to gauge but probably underestimated
- now growing demand – 1<sup>st</sup> timers and repeats
- triggers mostly crises in income: job loss and/or problems with benefits; these underpinned by on-going low income, rising costs, indebtedness



## **findings cont..**

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/food-aid-research-report>

- may relieve emergency needs but not underlying causes of household food insecurity
- households struggle to manage; food aid usually 'last resort'; probably many do not use
- other help/support from providers very important
- food bank data unreliable indicators of need
- larger scale networks evolving fast; harder for smaller, more local level activities; increasingly overwhelmed
- provision is vulnerable to not meeting demand; policy must focus on long-term needs & causes

## **challenges & responses:**

- *reactions and responses to report*
  - very little explicit from government
  - much from press and civil society
  - much online (note language and framing)
- *reactions and responses to issue*
  - new research
  - volunteering, EndHungerFast, lobbying
  - charities & faith groups – urgent reports
  - local authorities - inquiries, support
  - **APPG Hunger & Food Poverty Inquiry**
  - **Fabian Society Commission on Food & Poverty**

## food poverty and household food insecurity: challenges in current responses

- APPG & Fabian Society commissions food & poverty and cross-sectoral responses
- devolved nations: different framings and responses
- civil society, think-tanks, professional groups: research, inquiries, lobbying
- cities, local authorities: monitoring; responses
  - support for food initiatives
- shifting responsibilities?
  - social security
  - food industry
- rights based approaches

## Rights based approaches

states are required to **respect, protect, fulfil** food rights; non-state actors' have responsibilities too

- state should not impede access to adequate food
- state should prevent individuals or enterprises (including corporate actors) depriving people of access
- state should strengthen people's access to resources to ensure their means to a livelihood and food security – levels of income, benefits etc

these are **obligations** not recommended options

Riches & Silvasti eds 2014 *First World Hunger revisited: food charity or the right to food?* PalgraveMacMillan; Dowler & O'Connor 2012 *Soc Sci & Med*, 74, 44-51



## food poverty and household food insecurity: challenges in current responses

- who responds practically, and how
- level and responsibilities; accountability
- whose voices heard
- language and framing – who sets agenda
- research: sensitivities, usage data, indicators

*'key theme explored [...] was the perplexity that lies at the heart of involvement in food banks: are we becoming part of the problem? How can we ensure that, whilst helping those in crisis, we do not collude with institutional injustice and help in establishing informal emergency food aid as part of the welfare system'*

*'hunger is isolating but never isolated...'* Webster 2014 *Food 999*

Diocese of Oxford

## need to get to sustainable 'just' food and nutrition

- people's rights to produce, consume food respected
- socially & environmentally sustainable ways of obtaining healthy food through production, purchase, earning enough
- sustainable ways and means of researching, producing, distributing food; grounded in/ governed by just, equitable, moral, ethical social values
- food for health should be obtained in ways that uphold human dignity
- solutions to problems are 'joined up'

**sustainable food systems contribute to high levels of wellbeing within healthy, just societies, that live within environmental limits**