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The growth of food banks in Britain and what they mean for social policy

Abstract

Recent UK social policy has been dominated by welfare reform and austerity. This paper draws on empirical research to argue that the rise and prominence of food banks is the embodiment of a wider political-economic trajectory of social policy change which has intensified significantly since 2010 and involved reinterpretations of the causes of and responses to poverty. It highlights the potential of food banks as a lens through which to interrogate the consequences of these policy shifts in relation to: the importance of structural determinants; the inadequacy of relying on ad hoc privatised caring initiatives; and the increasing embeddedness of food banks in local welfare landscapes. The paper concludes by arguing that food is an important conceptual tool, which critical social policy researchers should employ more often to explore questions of justice, equality and wellbeing.

Key Words

UK; welfare reform; neo-liberalisation; Food insecurity; food banks

Introduction

The growth of food banks (charitable initiatives providing emergency food to people in need) is a topic increasingly occupying social policy researchers in the UK. In the year 2016-2017 the UK's largest food banking organisation, the Trussell Trust Foodbank Network, distributed 1,182,954 food parcels to adults and children across the country, up from 128,697 in the year 2011-2012 (Trussell Trust, no date). This paper explores the wider implications that this recent rise of charitable food assistance has for critical social policy research and practice. It reveals the key ways in which these projects tell a broader tale about our welfare state – how it has changed and what it may yet become.

The paper advances critical thinking on the relationship between social policy and food charity. It does this by suggesting that whilst food charity might be an increasingly embedded reality of local welfare landscapes, this need not always be the case if we re-imagine the direction of social policy; to focus instead on social justice, rights and entitlements. A key aim of the paper is to explore the ways in which food insecurity and food banks can push the envelope of social policy and help us to ask bolder questions about where the UK welfare state has got to and where it should go.

Drawing on the strengths of different disciplinary perspectives, this paper advances the emerging social policy thinking on the links between welfare, poverty and food. The last five years have been particularly important for the development of this field of social policy research. When the UK government commissioned a review of the evidence on food aid, there was very little peer reviewed research on the topic (Lambie-Mumford et al 2014). Now, many leading journals covering social policy issues have hosted important studies on the drivers and shapers of contemporary food insecurity and food aid use (Garthwaite 2016, Loopstra et al 2015, Power et al 2017, Williams et al 2016, Lambie-Mumford 2013).

The interdisciplinary contributions to knowledge in this area are highlighting the multiple dynamics at play both within food charities and between them and the wider welfare state. Geographers have explored the complexities of interactions and embedded contestations in these projects (Williams et al 2016); and health geographers are highlighting the role of food banks in relation to health inequalities as well as the lived experiences of recipients (Garthwaite et al 2015; Garthwaite 2016). Sociologists and theologians have also begun to explore the Christian underpinnings of many of these projects (Cameron 2014; Allen 2016). Social policy research on food banks therefore sits within a wider empirical discussion on the implications of these projects, especially in relation to how people are cared for and protected from the harshest effects of poverty.

Despite notable interjections (Joffe, 1991; Dowler, 2003) historically, UK social policy research has addressed hunger as one element, albeit an important one, in the definition, measurement and lived experience of poverty. Social policy engagement with issues of food access has, however, begun to change, particularly as recent social policy

research has started to highlight the links between austerity and welfare reform policies since 2010 and the growth of food charity provision (Loopstra et al 2015, 2016, 2018).

Food Security

There remains a lack of clarity in social policy circles regarding an accepted terminology of food access issues (Lambie-Mumford and Dowler 2015). To facilitate greater consistency and potential for cross-country learning this paper adopts the definition of household food security used by many international researchers:

‘access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life and includes at a minimum: a) the ready availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods, and b) the assured ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways (e.g., without resorting to emergency food supplies, scavenging, stealing, and other coping strategies). Food insecurity exists whenever the availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or the ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways is limited or uncertain.’ (Anderson, 1990, p.1560)

The ways in which the concept of food security has been operationalised – particularly in North America – has highlighted the vital importance of income in experiences of food insecurity (Tarasuk 2001b). Anderson’s broader conceptualisation above also emphasises the social acceptability of people’s food experiences; which moves beyond nutritional considerations to concerns for justice and equality. It is a relative concept, highlighting the importance of social inclusion and participation.

A key conceptual question for critical social policy, in approaching the issues of food access and emergency food provision, is the utility of separating ‘food insecurity’ from the wider experience of poverty. Framing the issue specifically as one of ‘food insecurity’ and entirely separate from broader poverty research would run the risk of creating a food silo where the problem is framed as one of a lack of food, to be solved by the provision of food (Tarasuk, 2001a). In this framing, important complexities would be overlooked and in the current context of welfare retrenchment, such a move could

further minimalise notions of need around crisis, rather than focussing on structural poverty and its wider determinants.

However, there is a more optimistic interpretation. When explicitly addressing food insecurity within the context of poverty-focused social policy analysis, this concept has the potential to broaden social policy research agendas to consider other dynamics, other institutional and experiential interactions and critically explore the role of modern charity. The concept can be used to describe a particularly complex policy problem and represent an acknowledgement of the numerous stakeholders and sectors involved in its resolution, from the food industry to the voluntary sector, and from social security policy to retail planning policy. Conceptualised this way, 'food insecurity' could become an identifiably important site for social policy investigation, where social, economic and food related policies converge and are manifest in a particular experience of exclusion. Food security need not minimise social policy research around notions of charity and crisis. As outlined above, the key aim of the paper is to explore the ways in which food insecurity and food banks can push the boundaries of social policy research and help us to ask bolder questions. Food insecurity and food charity research need not be as residual as it might first appear.

In contrast to confusion over food insecurity concepts, there is an emerging terminology around food charity in the UK. Broadly, charitable emergency food provision constitutes voluntary initiatives helping people to access food they otherwise would not be able to obtain. Whilst charitable emergency food assistance would include a range of initiatives such as hot meal providers or soup runs, 'food banks' have dominated the discourse and debate in the UK in recent years. Food banks have come to be recognised as charitable initiatives, which provide emergency parcels of food for people to take away, prepare and eat (Lambie-Mumford and Dowler, 2014). This provision is usually given to help relieve some kind of (food) crisis. Whilst this food bank label is quite high profile and dominates the food charity debate, it belies significant variability amongst the projects that identify themselves as such, including differences in the food provided, how they are accessed and when they are open and if other services are on offer at the project (Dowler and Lambie-Mumford, 2015). Overall, the sheer range (in type and size) of the wider charitable emergency food provision category makes their full extent and coverage hard for policy makers and researchers to capture.

This paper proceeds as follows. In the first instance the place of food in UK social policies is briefly outlined; to provide policy context to the contemporary debates around food charity. Following this, empirical data are employed to argue that the rise and prominence of food banks is the embodiment of a historic political-economic trajectory of social policy change which has intensified significantly since 2010 and involved reinterpretations of the causes of and responses to poverty. The paper also highlights the potential of the study of food banks as a lens through which to interrogate the consequences of these policy shifts. The rise of food banks emphasises the importance of structural determinants of individual circumstances and the inadequacy of relying on ad hoc privatised caring initiatives as principal responses. The data also highlight the increasing embeddedness of food banks in local welfare landscapes which raises critical questions about the future of this provision. The paper concludes by making a case for more engagement with food issues by social policy analysts; it argues that food is an important conceptual tool, which critical social policy researchers should employ more often to explore questions of justice, equality and wellbeing.

Research

To explore these issues, the paper draws on data from the two largest national charities involved in the facilitation or co-ordination of emergency food provision in the UK – the Trussell Trust Foodbank Network and FareShare. Both organisations operate on a not-for-profit franchise basis with layers of local and national management.

The Trussell Trust Foodbank Network is a network of not-for-profit franchises of the 'foodbank' project. The initiative involves the collection, storage and distribution of food to people in 'crisis' at a local level (Lambie-Mumford, 2013). Provision takes the form of food parcels containing a prescribed combination of long-life food stuffs, given to people who have been referred by professionals in the local community.

FareShare is a surplus food redistribution charity which takes surplus food from within the food system and redistributes it to community projects who in turn give out the food to people in need. Provision therefore varies depending on what the projects provide and could include for example hot meals or food parcels.

Extensive qualitative research was undertaken with these organisations. Interviews were conducted with 51 individuals over a year-long period (September 2012 – October 2013). Research participants included providers of emergency food (project managers or equivalent of Trussell Trust Foodbanks and projects receiving food from FareShare) and strategic members of staff at the head offices of both organisations (for example regional and national managers, directors and executive officers). Given the organisational focus of the study, only a small number of emergency food recipients (four) were interviewed for the research. The research received full ethical approval from the University of Sheffield ethics committee. This project was the first to comprehensively study these two leading national organisations and to ask questions about how these emergency food systems operated and the drivers and implications of their working.

Food-related social policies

In the UK, approaches to ensuring everyone has access to healthy food has been left to the operation of markets, consumer choice and a social welfare system which is meant to enable those lacking employment to be able to purchase food (Dowler et al., 2011). The foundations of the welfare state were built upon Beveridge's five giants of 'want, squalor, idleness, ignorance and disease' (Beveridge, 1942). However, Dowler has argued that food has been largely 'invisible' in UK social policy (Dowler, 2003, p.140), instead embedded either in welfare support (social security) or development of human capital (mothers and children) (Dowler et al., 2001). Food access, however, is a key part of UK poverty measures. Having the resources to access a customary diet was at the forefront of Townsend's 1979 definition of poverty and questions relating to types of diet and food experiences (such as being able to invite friends or family over for a meal) are established measures in surveys such as Breadline Britain and the Poverty and Social Exclusion Survey (Gordon and Pantazis, 1997; Gordon et al., 2000; PSE, 2012).

Outside of social security payments are a handful of supplementary initiatives designed to facilitate better access to food, which are managed by other government departments. Whilst the Department for Work and Pensions oversees out of work benefit programmes, the Department of Health manages the Healthy Start food voucher

scheme and the Department for Education and individual local authorities manage school meal and snack programmes. The Healthy Start Scheme replaced the Welfare Food Scheme in 2006 and provides vouchers (for formula and cow's milk and fresh or frozen fruit and vegetables) to pregnant women and children less than four years old (Lucas et al., 2015). Families are eligible if their income is below £16,190 a year, or they are in receipt of tax credits or out of work benefits or if the mother is aged under 18; the vouchers are worth £3.10 each and the scheme provides two vouchers per week per child under twelve months and one per week per pregnant woman and child aged 12-48 months (Lucas et al., 2015).

Parents of school aged children do not have to pay for school meals if they are in receipt of income support or out of work benefits, tax credits or state pension credit (Long, 2015). Although plans for Universal Credit would introduce an income threshold for this entitlement (Children's Society 2018). From September 2014 free school meals were made universal for all children in reception class, year 1 and year 2 of school (ages 5-7 years) (Long, 2015). The School Fruit and Vegetable Scheme, established after the publication of the NHS plan in 2000, is also available to promote access to healthy foods for children and provides one portion of fruit or vegetables every day to all children aged four to six who are in state funded schools (NHS, 2015). The 2013 'School Food Plan' announced funding for breakfast clubs in schools in deprived areas; £3.15million (to be match funded by the successful tenderer) over two years was announced, to provide breakfast club provision in schools with a 40% or higher free school meal entitlement (Dimbleby and Vincent, 2013). The £6 million match-funded investment was designed to set up breakfast clubs in 500 schools over the two years (ibid).

Food banks and a changing welfare state

Research is beginning to highlight the importance of recent social policy reforms as key drivers of the rise of food charity (Loopstra et al 2015). This paper advances the evolving evidence base by putting the phenomenon of the recent growth of food charity into a wider historical context. It argues that the rise and prominence of food banks, in response to experiences of household food insecurity, is the embodiment of a longer political-economic trajectory of social policy change which has intensified significantly

since 2010 and is cumulatively impacting on both the need for and shape of these initiatives.

Recent literature on the age of austerity and contemporary welfare reform highlights the dangers of ahistorical social policy analysis and the importance of understanding current shifts within a wider historical context (Farnsworth and Irving 2015a). This paper highlights the importance of studying the rise of food banks in the UK in relation to the historical trajectory of the political economy of welfare. Particularly the ways in which shifts in interpretations around the causes of and responses to poverty are manifest in the phenomenon of rising food bank use.

Generally, since the 1970s, neoliberalising policy shifts have involved increasingly individualised notions of risk and care, increased conditionality and communitarian and contractarian interpretations of dependency and solidarity (Dean, 2008; Ellison and Fenger, 2013). It is in this 40-year context that current reforms and policy changes have taken place. But importantly, historically-focused analyses also highlight the observable step change in social policy since 2010. Authors have compared the current era of austerity to previous eras – notably the 1920s/30s and 1970s/80s. Analyses point to the significant divergences between recent and historical policy approaches to austerity in relation to the contemporary lack of policy innovation or re-visioning of the social contract, instead favouring a stark embedding of pre-existing ideologies (Farnsworth and Irving 2015b; Armingeon 2014). Social policy analysts have also drawn attention to the sheer scale of change introduced in the last ten years through policies of austerity and welfare reform, reporting the largest cuts in public finance ever seen and some of the most extensive welfare reforms since the introduction of the welfare state in the 1940s (Taylor-Gooby and Stoker, 2011; Beatty and Fothergill, 2013).

Changing policy interpretations of poverty

This paper is particularly interested in the impact of changing interpretations of the causes of and best responses to poverty. Since 2010 there has been a marked departure from a focus on structural causes of poverty. Instead, there is increasing emphasis on individual factors and notions of personal responsibility for circumstances of poverty, tied up with a resurgence of discourses around 'deservingness' (Pantazis 2016; Ellison

and Fenger, 2013). Key changes to how responses to poverty are organised date back in particular to the late 1990s and the re-imagining of the role of the state in relation to a growing emphasis on increased conditionality attached to state provision (and, since 2010, reducing entitlement) and an increasing role for non-state providers. Welfare diversification policies under successive New Labour governments, and more recently the coalition government 'Big Society' platform, have resulted in the professionalization and expansion of the role of the voluntary sector and growing expectations of the role they will play meeting needs in local communities (see Alcock, 2010; Fyfe 2005; Carmel and Harlock 2008).

The empirical data reveal how the growth of food banks is an embodiment of these key shifts in policy interpretations of the causes of and responses to poverty. State welfare retrenchment and increased conditionality were found to play an important role in driving need for food banks. And the changing nature and expectations of the voluntary sector are directly influencing the shape of these projects.

Welfare retrenchment and the need for food banks

Reforms to welfare processes and entitlements have driven the need for food banks in several ways. The data revealed how changes to levels of entitlements have reduced incomes and problematic administrative processes are leaving people without income at all (for further detail on the latter see Lambie-Mumford 2017). These findings are supported by other academic and grey literature which have also identified links between the generosity, conditionality and administration of social security and the need for food banks (Loopstra et al 2015, 2018; Perry et al 2014). This research highlighted the impact of specific reforms which are reducing household incomes, including the so called 'bedroom tax', changes to council tax benefits and extended sanction lengths:¹

'I think it's quite easy to tick the wrong thing on the phone or on the form and then you won't have any money and if you don't have any reserves you haven't got any money to buy food with. I think with sanctions being increased in length, this could be a more serious problem in the future. I mean if we're only going to give people three lots of food but they've been sanctioned for 6 months or

something I'm not sure what they're going to do, I don't even know what the government expects them to do.'

Burngreave Foodbank Manager

The abolition of the discretionary social fund and its replacement with short-term benefit advances and local welfare assistance (managed differently by different local authorities) were also seen by providers as particularly problematic:ⁱⁱ

'The thing that's really struck me is there's such a variety of different ways of dealing with the Social Fund through local authorities, it's exceptionally confusing and the way it was implemented wasn't very clear to anybody. It's left the third sector [...] overwhelmed.'

Trussell Trust Foodbank Network Director

Food banks and changing responses to poverty

The data also highlighted the ways in which changing ideas around responses to poverty – and particularly the increased role for the charitable sector in meeting needs in local communities – have impacted on the shape and nature of these initiatives. Within this context, the charities studied were found to approach their work strategically, identifying aims and ways of proactively achieving them, particularly when it comes to organisational growth, corporate partnership working and food sourcing. Both organisations also developed a range of professionalised processes to respond to perceived need and assume responsibility for food insecurity in practice.

The Trussell Trust operate a not-for-profit franchise model with franchisees paying an upfront franchise fee and then required to work in particular ways and be audited annually; in return they can use Trussell Trust branding and get training and on-going support from regional and national level staff. FareShare operates a similar model with depots being encouraged to be independently viable social enterprises which have to comply with food safety regulations and benefit from branding, training and, crucially, connections to food supplies which are facilitated nationally.

Whilst interviewees talked about organisational growth as a response to demand (either for food banks or the availability of surplus for redistribution) in both cases how this growth was realised in practice was considered at a national level. At the time of the research, the Trussell Trust were exploring logistical options to facilitate their continued expansion with the possibility for hubs where food is stored and from which individual food banks draw down supplies. For FareShare growth was sought through a process of building organisational reputation so that the food industry would feel confident in working with them.

These data revealed visions for either a food bank in every town/community or to have a FareShare depot servicing every part of the United Kingdom. The growth of these organisations and this planned future trajectory was spoken of as a response to need but one strategic-level interviewee did highlight how some of the need for this provision could be overcome and was unnecessary (i.e. through resolving administrative mistakes such as incorrectly administering sanctions or denial of entitlements and slow processing of applications and payments).

Both organisations also have centralised approaches to food sourcing on a national scale. FareShare staff build relationships with the most prominent food retailers to open up their extensive supply chains in order to access surplus. Through national level partnerships, Trussell Trust food banks are able to hold collection days at stores throughout the country (with local food banks collecting at their local shops). These arrangements are seen as significantly added value for franchisees, as many projects previously struggled to obtain the authorisation to run them at individual shop level.

Both case study organisations foster corporate partnerships more generally. The basis of these partnerships appears to be varied, involving opening up surplus or food products (for FareShare and on occasion Foodbank), sending retail partner staff to volunteer (both case studies), sharing expertise in the form of mentoring or consultancy (for the Foodbank Network). In securing these partnerships, the data suggests that the case study organisations proactively maximise the opportunities which are being presented to them as a consequence of the high profile of issues of food assistance and food poverty. They also appear to consciously tap into Corporate Social Responsibility agendas and to understand how they benefit from competitiveness amongst retailers:

‘We were well aware that actually although they’re ultra-competitive, one of the things that the retailers do all of the time is copy each other. If they see something working then the others pile in there. That’s why Asda have done a food drive with Trussell, and both of us have done this partnership with Tesco.’
FareShare CEO

In the process of securing partnership agreements, it appears from the data that the case study organisations are also careful to consider the challenges and opportunities open to them. There was evidence of organisations planning for when agreements end, seeking relationships with multiple organisations to avoid dependency and, as the quote below shows, being forthright in their position when agreeing terms and conditions:

‘We have not gone anywhere where we haven’t wanted to go. We have worked on exactly the same ethos as we do with grant funding: “This is what we do. If you want to fund us to do this, thank you very much. We will have your money. If you come back to us and say, ‘The conditions are that you change your model here or you do this,’ which would have a significant impact, then we wouldn’t take the funding.” In the same way, we wouldn’t take the corporate deal either.’

Trussell Trust Head of Fundraising

The data presented above highlights the ways in which the growth of modern food banks is the embodiment of shifts in understandings of the causes of and best responses to poverty over the last twenty years. We have long had food assistance (McGlone et al 1999), but this provision is on a new scale, it is professionalised and more formalised than before and is a powerful representation of the privatisation of care for “the hungry”. At the same time, this and other research highlights that the drivers of need for food charity are often linked to the post-2010 context of increasingly reduced and conditional social security provisioning.

Importantly, however, food banks are also an insightful lens through which to interrogate the broader consequences of these social policy shifts. Notably, they highlight the importance of structural determinants of individual need for emergency food assistance and the inadequacy of relying on ad hoc privatised caring practices as principal responses. The relationships food banks are building with other welfare

agencies and providers also highlights the increasing embeddedness of food banks within the modern welfare landscape, raising critical questions about the future of welfare in practice.

Importance of structural determinants

In contrast to prevailing policy interpretations of poverty and its dynamics, this research illustrates how the growth of food banks serves to highlight again the importance of structural determinants of household circumstances. Importantly, this implies that the key drivers of need for emergency food assistance could be significantly misunderstood in the current policy framework emphasising individual behaviour and responsibility for poverty.

The causes and drivers of household food insecurity remain contested and the academic literature looks at a range of areas – including, for example, food skills and growing. However, this research and other contemporary work on food insecurity point at the role of socioeconomic structures in driving experiences of food insecurity, particularly those related to economic security; for example, costs of living, income levels and income security (Coleman-Jensen, 2011; De Marco and Thorburn, 2009; Kirkpatrick and Tarasuk, 2011).

In data collected about why providers felt people needed emergency food provision, there was an awareness amongst participants of the relationship between the crises they were seeing in their projects and their recipients' wider circumstances of poverty:

'Yes, we deal with immediate crises and so, yes, that is a basic premise of the food banks, but those crises arise as a consequence of a number of other factors. [...] One of the growing ones is low income. That is not in isolation from the cost of living, the cost of fuel going up and wages being static.'

Trussell Trust Wales Regional Development Officer (RDO)

Within this context of wider experiences of poverty, the role of food charity was often perceived as looking after people not adequately supported by or who had fallen through the safety net:

‘Because we are dealing with people whose [...] elasticity is very, very limited, so you just move it £10 either way and people are in deep trouble.’

‘They don’t have any resilience, they don’t have any savings’

Trussell Trust Executive Chairman

The rise of insecure work (such as so-called ‘zero-hour contracts’), low-paid work and welfare reform (which has reduced social security entitlements and increased conditionality) are all factors referenced in recent debates about food banks and rising need in the UK (APPG, 2014). Statistics produced by Defra (2014, p.20) have also shown that falling income and rising costs of living resulted in food being over 20% less affordable for those living in the lowest income decile in 2014 compared to in 2003. Structural determinants of need for emergency food provision and wider experiences of food insecurity are therefore key to understanding the dynamics of the growth of food bank use in the UK. In contrast to current policy interpretations focused on notions of behavioural and individual drivers of poverty, this research suggests instead that structural dimensions must remain a critically important part of analysis around food experiences in the context of poverty.

Inadequacy of relying on ad hoc private caring initiatives

As state-based responses to poverty have been restructured in recent years in line with neoliberal agendas, how care for those in poverty is defined and put into practice has changed significantly; to become increasingly privatised, individualised and marginalised (Lawson, 2007; Williams, 2001). As an example of this kind of care, studying modern food charity can highlight the inadequacy of relying on ‘private’ initiatives as primary responses to need. Previous research has served to bring the same issues to light in other country contexts. Particularly in North America, work establishing the links between emergency food provision and the loss of rights and entitlements in relation to food and social policy has provided robust challenges to assumptions about the appropriateness of food charity as a response to food insecurity (Poppendieck, 1994 and 1998; Tarasuk and Davies, 1996; Riches, 1997).

Importantly for analyses focussed on social justice, food charity creates 'other' social protections systems, which are not based on rights or entitlements but instead defined by exclusion. Emergency food provision is an identifiably 'other' system of food acquisition given the ways in which it lacks key features of food shopping (the socially accepted method of food acquisition (Meah 2013)). The food is largely sourced and exclusively acquired from outside the marketplace and recipients lack (consumer or citizenship) rights within these systems. Emergency food systems are not only identifiably 'other' but experientially so as well. Feelings of embarrassment and stigma, the religious materiality of the spaces in which this food is often provided, and discourses of the 'needy' and the 'hungry' all serve to alienate and socially exclude those in need of assistance with food (see Lister 2004 for discussion on the importance of language and disempowerment). Food banks are clearly a last resort for those that need to turn to them:

'It's not nice, having to rely on other people but it comes in helpful when there's nothing else, I'd rather take help rather than have my children go hungry.'

Emergency Food Recipient

Importantly for social policy research, these systems are not universal or guaranteed. Food charity is unaccountable to those that it serves, their accessibility is highly varied and recipients lack any rights or entitlements in these systems. What we are talking about then is an ad hoc charitable initiative defined by and perpetuating exclusion. By highlighting key characteristics of the realities of privatised care (ad hoc, not guaranteed or accessible to all) the study of food charity highlights the inadequacy of relying on this kind of provision as principal responses to poverty and food insecurity. What is urgently needed instead is a revisiting of the contemporary concept of care, which pushes back against its marginalisation and privatisation and instead sees it as a social ethic - as structural and public (Lawson 2007).

Increasing complexity of welfare practice

Diverse local welfare systems, which combine state and voluntary provision, are not new in the UK. Examining how contemporary food banks have come to fit within these

systems provides a particularly useful lens through which to ask how they are evolving in the context of increasingly reduced state provision. As finance for state services is cut and entitlements are reduced, the funding policies of food banks and how the provision of food distribution is realised in local areas provide particularly useful insights into the modern practice of welfare.

While food banks are at pains to stress that they do not enter into service level agreements, reports suggest that they will accept funding grants from local councils, but the nature of this funding (in terms of expectations and terms and conditions) is not yet clear (BBC News 2014). At a devolved level, the Scottish government has launched the Emergency Food Fund (EFF) as part of the implementation of welfare reforms. This fund (totalling £500,000) aims to 'support projects which respond to immediate demands for emergency food aid and help to address the underlying causes of food poverty'. It outlines:

'Grants will be given to projects that concentrate on preventing food crisis recurring, those that build connections between food aid providers, advice and support agencies and organisations working to promote healthy eating and reduce food waste.' (Scottish Government, no date)

The practice of food distribution at a local level also reveals how increasingly embedded food provision is in welfare systems. This is particularly clear when looking at the way food bank vouchers are deployed by state welfare professionals, the relationship with Job Centre Plus, and how local welfare assistance systems have evolved. Increasingly in practice, food bank vouchers are seen as an important addition to the toolkit of professionals within, in some cases, state funded services (Lambie 2011). One example of this is that in 2010 an agreement was made that Job Centre Plus agencies would hold Trussell Trust food bank vouchers (Trussell Trust 2010). This was revoked in 2013, but resulted in reports of differing local practice (some still referring, others not) (Butler 2013). The practice of involving state professionals in referring or signposting people to food banks for help raises the question of how far food bank vouchers are becoming a routine aspect of the administration of social security and social care in the UK.

This embedding of food banks within the practice of welfare is also observable in the new locally-based social fund arrangements. The quote below is a reflection on the

consultation process for the creation of the Bristol local welfare assistance scheme and highlights the role that the local authority were expecting food banks to play within the new arrangements:

‘I was sitting in a meeting the other week and I was told, [...] if we have a one off payment card for people here, the plan is that people can have one a year and then they’ll be referred to food banks by whatever agency takes this over and my answer to that was ‘you are assuming that we are going to take on your agency as a referral agency’ and I said ‘I’m not going to guarantee that’

East Bristol Foodbank manager

Grant funding, food bank referral mechanisms and the incorporation of food banks into the administration of emergency welfare schemes at a local level all highlight how increasingly interlocked food banks are becoming in local welfare landscapes. These charities are taking responsibility, in practice, for experiences of food insecurity as the state continues to retreat from the direct provision of social security and social care support. As food banks become increasingly embedded in local welfare the question is raised of whether it is now inevitable that food banks will continue to play a substantial role in the practice of welfare in the UK. Given the importance of the wider political economy of welfare in shaping both the need for and shape of these projects and their practice, avoiding the institutionalisation of food banks will necessarily involve revisiting the current drivers and priorities of social policy reforms and, ultimately, defending the potential of the welfare state (see also Farnsworth and Irving 2015b).

Conclusion: the utility and importance of the food lens in social policy

On one hand, the rise of food charity and the study of it may appear to some social policy analysts to be unhelpfully reductionist. It could focus attention on food crisis and its alleviation rather than underpinning structural drivers. Narrow focus on need for food banks (food crisis) can miss wider determinants; and emphasis on charitable responses (for example ‘feeding Britain’ (APPG 2014)) can incorporate regressive notions of ‘feeding’ rather than the facilitation of wellbeing. On the other hand, as this paper has demonstrated, exploring the nature of food charity and the experiences of

those people who are forced to obtain emergency food also prompts wider questions about the adequacy and appropriateness of social policy approaches.

Historically, UK social policy has not engaged much with explicit questions of food and access to it. Yet, as Levi-Strauss is often quoted as saying, food is useful 'to think with' (Levi-Strauss 1983; Caplan 2015). Social policy researchers should think more with food issues. Food banks and food insecurity have the potential to be a very effective lens through which to explore bigger, more traditional, social policy questions.

Food charity and food insecurity can provide an important site for exploring questions of (in)justice and studying the impacts of changing social policy on people's lives. It can also facilitate a closer examination of the relationship between state-provided income (social security) and services (community services) in people's ability to live well. Food, unlike many other empirical issues, also draws attention to both people and place-based dynamics simultaneously, which is particularly important in the context of contemporary discussions of geographical exclusion and renewal. Importantly as well, the study of food charity and food security also provides a lens through which we can explore intersections with many dimensions of social policy – such as education, health and social security. Ultimately, these phenomena necessitate us to look at some of the most fundamental social policy questions about the changing nature of the social contract and the question of how far the continued existence of the giant of 'want' suggest that contract is failing.

Arguably a much bigger task for social policy researchers will be one of (re)visioning. At the same time as we are exploring questions of where we are, we must also face up to the challenges of exploring where we can go from here. Questions about the future of social policy must be at the forefront of the next phase of research on food insecurity and food charity. To do this, issues of rights and entitlements and the question of a progressive role for charities must be at the heart of our work.

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ⁱ For further detail on these reforms see DWP 2012; Clarke et al 2014; Ollerenshaw 2016; DWP 2014

ⁱⁱ For further detail on this reform see Simmons, 2013; LGA 2015