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DOUGLAS, F. and GOODWIN, S.

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Good food is good medicine

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Why poverty, food insecurity and 'surplus food' or 'food waste' are words that should not appear in the same sentence.

*Reflections on our recent Creative Conversation with Laura Chalmers of Robert Gordon University
By Dr Flora Douglas, Robert Gordon University and Sabine Goodwin, Independent Food Aid Network*

The growth of charitable food aid in the UK is a phenomenon that needs deep and persistent questioning. This was the reasoning behind our recent [web-based Creative Conversation](#), and the motivation to co-write this piece as we reflected upon this experience. As the numbers of food banks and emergency food parcels given out have grown alongside the tonnes of surplus food redistributed, food insecurity levels have also increased, telling us, if we are willing to listen, that "[food banks are no solution to poverty](#)" and the conflation of the food surplus and food poverty problems must be addressed.

We were delighted that so many attendees from a range of experience of the issues on the agenda were able to join us on the 1st of November and could contribute to the discussion. And that so many expressed an interest in accessing a recording of the conversation. It certainly felt that it was the start of a series of conversations at the heart of ending the need for food banks and other charitable food aid provision. We were able to discuss how we got to a place where food banking is entrenched in our society, the role of food surplus redistribution charities in contributing to the normalisation of charitable food aid as a response to poverty, and what the critical elements of any transition might look like that that we agreed need to be grounded in partnership working.

Understanding how food banks and the wider charitable food aid sector have grown in the UK is the first step in building an exit strategy from the normalisation of a wholly inadequate [secondary food system that](#) has emerged in the UK in the past 15 years or so to support people struggling to afford food. This haphazard and inefficient arrangement has grown at pace, especially since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. And we know that despite all the well-meaning effort and energy of those working and volunteering in this arena, this system cannot provide dignity for the people who are having to resort to using food aid, nor can it ensure everyone's inalienable [Right to Food](#).

Currently, drivers of food insecurity are on the rise again, particularly impactful are the falling value of incomes as food and energy costs rise, and the implementation of UK Government's cut to Universal Credit amidst long-standing reductions in social security entitlements. These worsening levels of food insecurity bring with them an obvious danger that charitable food aid providers will become further embedded and entrenched within local communities. At the same

time, there have been cuts to services and organisations able to support cash first approaches for those people forced into poverty.

The cut to Universal Credit on October 6th is predicted to have a devastating impact on the household incomes of millions of people, including families with young children and people with complex health needs. The Department of Work and Pensions' own Family Resources Survey found that 43% of UK households (from April 2019 to March 2020) who relied on Universal Credit for their income were food insecure (compared to 8% of all UK households). There are now nearly twice as many people claiming Universal Credit compared to the time these figures were reported, during which, food and energy prices have escalated, and continue to do so. What's more, 2.1 million people in the UK who are still on legacy benefits have yet to benefit from the £20 uplift. An extraordinary coalition of anti-poverty charities, public figures, MPs and experts of experience have called this decision to cut Universal Credit out, urging the Government to #KeepTheLifeline. Notably absent, however, were food surplus redistribution charities staying safe with environmental agendas despite the "fighting hunger" talk used to solicit support.

We both felt that there was much more to say beyond our discussion about the desperate urgency of the crisis, and in particular the health implications (physical as well as mental) for food insecure people, who every week are expected to survive on this unjust and inefficient system, which compromises their ability to deal with underlying health conditions, or enjoy good health more generally while living with food insecurity. From a public health perspective, it's important to challenge the lack of scrutiny there seems to be in relation to the (in)adequacy of the food (quantity and quality wise) going through the UK food banking system via the food surplus industry, and the impact this has on people's long-term health. If people are exhorted to eat healthily for the good of their health, to reduce health care costs and address climate change, then a healthy and nutritious diet must be affordable in the first place. International evidence indicates that food waste channelled towards "left behind people" is known to include large quantities of highly processed, high fat, salt and sugary foods. The widening of health inequalities between rich and poor observed across the UK this last decade means it is even more urgent that we disentangle the conflation of the problems of food waste and food poverty. And as the Plenty To Share campaign argues the way to address the food waste problem is to reduce food waste not to channel it towards frontline food aid providers.

And there is still more to be discussed around the inconsistency and double standards that permeate food poverty language when it comes to messaging around ending hunger, fighting hunger and ending child food poverty; there's an elephant in the room. If food surplus redistribution charities and supermarkets are appealing for donations and support to "fight" or "end hunger" in the UK, then, surely, they must call to address the key driver of hunger - poverty. Recently, FareShare has reported that vulnerable people are empowered by playing their part to help the environment. If supermarkets are prepared to join forces with Marcus Rashford to "end child food poverty" then they must at least pay their employees a Real Living Wage to prevent their own staff from needing a food bank. It's a common occurrence for independent food banks to be supporting supermarket workers unable to afford food.

There's no doubt that ending the need for charitable food aid in this country requires partnership working and the involvement and advocacy of people impacted by food insecurity (and those

who support them) at every level. We need to collectively call for the systemic changes that would reduce poverty as well as food waste but also plan for the transition of food aid or other community organisations currently using surplus food. Food plays a key role in forging links amongst communities but that role does not need to involve food poverty or rely on the over-production of food or the fact that people can't afford to purchase food thus creating surplus.

There's much to be done and some ways of getting involved are included here. In Scotland, a recent significant development is the publication of the Scottish Government's draft national plan to end the need for food banks - responses to [the consultation](#) are very welcome. IFAN is working in local authorities across Scotland as well as in England, Wales and Northern Ireland to co-develop cash first referral leaflets - these are resources to help people access any existing financial entitlements and advice to maximize income and so reduce the need for charitable food aid. IFAN would be glad to hear from organisations keen to co-develop a 'Worrying About Money?' leaflet for their area. And there's the [Plenty To Share campaign](#) to sign up to that calls for an end to the very conflation of the food poverty and food surplus problems we've highlighted.

You can access a recording of the Creative Conversation at <https://www.rgu.ac.uk/runway-to-cop26/climate-emergency-through-the-lens-of-human-health>