



Beyond 'feeding the crisis': Mobilising 'more than food aid' approaches to food poverty in the UK

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ABSTRACT

Rising demand for emergency food during the last couple of decades in the UK has led to a great deal of academic interest in food aid provision, and food banking in particular. Efforts have also been made to examine food poverty and responses to it in more critical terms, which has entailed moving beyond a focus on emergency food support to engage with 'more than food aid' approaches. In this paper, I discuss how these latter approaches are beginning to be mobilised by national organisations, local authorities and place-based food partnerships in the UK. An important catalyst for this shift was the Covid-19 pandemic, which provided the crisis conditions that encouraged public and third-sector actors to think about, and act upon, food poverty in different ways. Drawing on an analysis of submissions to a Covid-19 food inquiry, place-based food initiatives implemented during the pandemic period and more recent initiatives instigated by national food support and anti-hunger groups, the paper examines how a diverse range of organisations are becoming more critical of existing (food aid) responses to food poverty and are seeking to develop more supportive local foodscapes based on a 'more than food aid' approach. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of this shift for future research on food poverty.

1. Introduction

"Instead of fixing the crisis of growing economic precarity and insecurity, we are feeding it." (Dickinson, 2020, 4)

My intention in this paper is to build on a growing body of scholarship that has highlighted the moral, political and practical difficulties associated with addressing food poverty through the food aid system. In doing this, the paper examines what I term a 'more than food aid' approach to food poverty, which involves the development of more critical analytical framings of food poverty as well consideration of other models for meeting the food (and wider) needs of those living in poverty. The focus of the paper is on the UK, where the rising demand for emergency food aid during the last couple of decades has attracted a great deal of academic scrutiny of food banks.¹ Although research has revealed the caring actions occurring in food bank spaces, it is widely recognised that the growing presence of food banks in the UK represents a spectacular failure of the welfare support system and that increasing reliance on charitable food aid to support those living in food poverty is problematic in many senses. As Dickinson (2020) argues, writing about

a similar situation in the US, the state is allowing poverty to be fed rather than fixed, with third sector food aid programmes now representing 'the leading edge of the twenty-first century response to growing poverty and economic insecurity' (2; see also Fisher, 2017; Riches, 2018).

A key argument made in this paper is that these more critical academic perspectives on food poverty and food aid are also becoming evident 'on the ground' in the UK, with local authorities and third sector agencies increasingly adopting a 'more than food aid' approach to respond to food poverty. This has involved individual local projects addressing food poverty in broader terms, national organisations promoting new models of food support, city councils implementing more progressive food strategies and place-based coalitions of actors developing more co-ordinated food assistance initiatives. An important catalyst for this shift, it is suggested, has been the Covid-19 pandemic, which, for various reasons, required food poverty to be comprehended and acted upon differently by a broad range of agencies. The paper provides a detailed account of this transition towards a 'more than food aid' approach in the UK, focusing largely on the pandemic period but also touching on the growth of 'more than food' initiatives since then.

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¹ Data collected by the Trussell Trust - a charity that operates a network of 1,400 food banks in the UK - show that the number of emergency food aid parcels distributed by its food banks increased from less than 3,000 in 2005–06 to almost three million in 2022–23 (Beatty et al., 2015; Trussell Trust, 2023).

The paper is structured around three sections. The next section discusses the development of food poverty research in the UK, reviews academic work that has critiqued the role of food aid, and food banks more particularly, in responding to food poverty, and considers more recent studies of ‘more than food aid’ approaches to food poverty. The second section examines how these more critical perspectives on food poverty and its responses are being adopted by national organisations, local authorities and place-based coalitions of actors working on food and poverty in the UK. To do this, the section draws on an analysis of materials from three sources: (i) submissions to a recent inquiry by the UK Parliament into Covid-19 and food supply; (ii) a digest of place-based food initiatives implemented during the pandemic period; and (iii) ‘more than food aid’ actions initiated by national food support organisations and anti-hunger campaign groups in the post-pandemic period. The third section of the paper discusses the implications of these academic, policy and practice-based shifts towards a ‘more than food aid’ approach for future research on food poverty.

2. Food and poverty: Developing critical connections beyond food aid

Hunger and malnutrition have long been viewed as two of the most obvious manifestations of poverty. It is only relatively recently though that the relations between food and poverty have received serious scrutiny from researchers in the UK. The seminal account of food and poverty was provided by Dowler et al. (2001) in their book, *Poverty Bites*, which was published by the UK’s Child Poverty Action Group.² The book presents a wide-ranging and critical exploration of food and poverty from the perspectives of nutrition, health, food access and food security, with a particular focus on families and children. The authors extend traditional concerns with nutrition and diet to consider the broader social and cultural significance of food within society, arguing that food needs to be understood as an ‘expression of who a person is, what they are worth and a measure of their ability to provide for their family’s basic needs’ (3). The book also introduces the notion of food poverty, which the authors define as ‘the inability to acquire or consume an adequate quality or sufficient quantity of food in socially acceptable ways, or the uncertainty that one will be able to do so.’ (12).

Despite providing a wealth of examples of the food dimensions of life on low income and setting out a radical policy agenda for ending food poverty, the book failed to act as a springboard for further research and writing on food poverty in the UK, with the topic continuing to be largely neglected by those working in both food and poverty studies for the next decade or so. In fact, it was not until the mid 2010 s that food poverty began to receive additional attention from researchers. The prompt for this increased interest was the emerging impacts of austerity policy in the UK. Responding to the 2007–08 global fiscal crisis that impacted the economies of many global North countries, the UK Coalition Government that came to power in 2010 implemented an austerity programme that sought to shrink the role and size of the state, significantly reduce levels of public spending and further diminish the scope of the welfare support system (see Duffy, 2014; Edmiston, 2017; Taylor-Gooby et al., 2017).

As increasing numbers of people began to fall through the state’s welfare safety net, third sector organisations and community groups mobilised themselves to provide emergency support to vulnerable groups (see O’Hara, 2014). One such area of support concerned food, with a growing number of food aid projects, and food banks more specifically, established to respond to rising levels of hunger being experienced by those living on low income in the UK.³ As O’Hara (2014)

² The book builds on arguments made in a previous paper (see Dowler and Dobson, 1995).

³ The number of food banks in the Trussell Trust network increased from 35 in 2006–07 to 650 in 2013–14 (Sosenko et al., 2019).

comments, ‘there was a growing awareness that something unprecedented was taking place. People who had lived on or near the poverty line their whole lives were telling me they had never seen anything like it, and every week there seemed to be a new food bank opening up’ (31–2). This rapid growth in the number of food banks in the UK then began to attract increasing interest from researchers, with a growing number of publications on food banks appearing from the mid-2010 s onwards.⁴ Collectively, these academic outputs have provided a rich vein of material on the nature of the food banking system, the everyday workings of individual food banks and the situations and experiences of people making use of food bank services (see Caraher and Cavicchi, 2014; Cloke et al., 2017; Cloke et al., 2020; Garthwaite, 2016; Garthwaite et al., 2015; Lambie-Mumford, 2013, 2017; Lambie-Mumford and Dowler, 2014; Lee et al., 2023; Loopstra et al., 2019; Purdham et al., 2016; May et al., 2019a, 2019b; Williams et al., 2016; Williams and May, 2023). What emerges from this work is that food banks constitute important ‘meantime’ spaces of care (Cloke et al., 2017) for those experiencing episodes of hunger in the absence of adequate state welfare support. What is also evident from this literature is that food banking needs to be positioned in more critical contexts.

The proliferation of food banks over recent years in the UK has acted both to normalise and to depoliticise food poverty (Caraher and Furey, 2017; Dowler, 2014; Dowler and Lambie-Mumford, 2015). Hunger has come to be constructed as a problem whose solution lies in the technical realm - the efficient distribution of sufficient amounts of donated food to sustain the operations of food banks - rather than in terms of citizens’ rights to affordable and nutritious food (Caplan, 2017). This is not to deny that many within the food banking movement have sought to publicise the rising demand for food aid; rather that the dominant focus on charitable food giving has deflected attention away from the politics of food poverty. Food banking’s dependency on donated and, in some cases, surplus food has also created a dangerous moral discourse, namely that those living on low income should have to rely on food that is unwanted or discarded by others (Riches, 2018). Similarly, food banking’s focus on community-based working and its reliance on volunteers has produced ‘discourses that detach responsibility from political and economic ideologies’ (Carson, 2013/14, 19).

Questions have also been raised about the effectiveness of food banks in responding to food poverty. While food banking may have become an accepted part of the contemporary welfare landscape, Loopstra (2018) suggests that there is a concerning ‘absence of evaluation of how well food banks meet the needs of people using them’ (58; see also Caraher and Furey, 2017). Indeed, food banking has been described as nothing more than a ‘moral safety valve’ (Poppendiek, 1999), creating the impression that action is being undertaken by engaged citizens but failing to address the structural underpinnings of food poverty. Garthwaite et al. (2015) go further, asserting that food banking is actually exacerbating poverty:

‘Insofar as food banks give the illusion of effectively responding to hunger, they unwittingly facilitate the further erosion of income supports to those at the bottom, leading to increased poverty and income insecurity and a continuing growing need for charitable food assistance’ (43).

It can be suggested that food banking now represents an institutionalised feature of the neoliberal welfare system, given that it has become ‘immersed into the government’s neoliberal ideologies, as part of its increasingly dismissive policies’ (Livingstone, 2015, 194; see also Strong, 2021). Food banks have been referred to as an ‘unofficial

⁴ An analysis of articles within the *International Bibliography of the Social Sciences* database reveals that four articles on food banks were published between 2013 and 2015, 15 appeared in 2016–18 and 28 articles were published between 2019 and 2021. In addition, two research monographs on food banks were published during this period (Garthwaite, 2016; Lambie-Mumford, 2017).

extension' to the welfare state - developed contrary to its original rules and then granted 'retrospective planning permission' by government (Pollard and Booth, 2019, 5). Some have argued that food banks are also mimicking key aspects of neoliberal welfare governmentality, with scarcity, sanctions and referrals embedded within their everyday practice (May et al., 2019a, 2019b; Strong, 2020). Beyond these points, the rapid recent growth in food bank usage constitutes a massive failure of national social and health security policy, given that 'protecting its citizens from going hungry is one of the most fundamental duties of government' (Cooper et al., 2014, 4; see also Lee, 2023; O'Connell and Brannen, 2021). As Pudham et al., (2016) argue, the presence of food banks represents a 'graphic representation of need, inequality and the impact of the economic recession on often already vulnerable individuals...' (1084).

It is also clear that food banking has largely reinforced, rather than challenged, dominant relations between food, economy and society. Its reliance on supermarkets and their customers to supply its food banks has done little to question the hegemonic control of the corporate retail sector over the food system. In fact, supermarkets have come to use their connections with food banking in ways that serve their interests, and particularly in relation to demonstrating corporate social responsibility (see Fisher, 2017; Livingstone, 2015). Additionally, food banking has not really shifted existing relationships between people and food. Its preference for long-life supermarket foodstuffs, for reasons of distributional efficiency, has tended to exclude fresh, sustainable and local produce from its food parcels. Handing out these parcels to people for them to be consumed in their homes not only fails to deal with the social isolation that is often experienced by those living in poverty but also misses opportunities to create shared food narratives through communal forms of food cooking and consumption (see Midgely and Slatcher, 2021; Rotenberg et al., 2021).

Efforts have been made to move beyond a focus on food banks and develop more critical framings of food poverty. Arcuri (2019), for example, uses a musical metaphor of flat and sharp keys to describe two contrasting interpretations of food poverty and responses to it. More specifically, she discusses these interpretations in relation to their moral, practical and policy positions. In terms of the first of these, Arcuri suggests that the flat key interpretation of food poverty is concerned with notions of individual social responsibility whilst the sharp key approach focuses on citizens' right to food. In relation to the practical aspects of tackling food poverty, the flat key approach considers the distribution of surplus or donated food to those in poverty as the most appropriate strategy, whereas the sharp key has the eradication of poverty as its goal. Turning to policy responses, Arcuri comments that the flat key interpretation is bound up with the market-based approaches and the corporate social responsibility of major food retailers. By contrast, the sharp key approach is concerned with entitlements to food, government interventions and a functioning welfare support system.

Healy (2019) also discusses how framings of food poverty connect with different forms of policy intervention, commenting that:

"If food poverty is defined simply in terms of hunger and deprivation, then the appropriate response is to give people more food – a role that is currently being filled, to some extent, by food banks across rich, liberal economies. If however, food poverty is linked more broadly to human rights, social justice and social exclusion, then the appropriate policy response is much broader and rests squarely with government." (106)

If this latter - 'more than food' aid - approach is accepted then it is necessary to recognise that tackling food poverty requires moving beyond food-based solutions (O'Connell et al., 2019); it also involves making sense of the pathways needed to exit food poverty, which include '[having] access to stores, to affordable foods, to income and to adequate housing' (Healy, 2019, 122). According to Pollard and Booth (2019), three principles underpin these 'more than food aid' responses to food poverty: first, they are centred on the needs of people living in

food poverty; second, they seek to empower those in food poverty by giving them opportunities to exercise food choice; and third, they are concerned with ensuring people in food poverty are provided with wider forms of social support and financial advice (see also Power, 2019).

Dickinson (2020) considers that existing food aid projects can transition to provide broader forms of advice, support and care. Discussing the US situation, she suggests that 'with sufficient state funding and a political commitment to ending hunger, food distribution programs and soup kitchens have the potential to effectively improve universal access to sufficient food' (154; see also Power and Small, 2022). Loopstra (2018), however, warns that making such changes 'may inadvertently serve to further entrench voluntary and charitable food assistance as part of the social safety net in the UK' (58). Others have drawn attention to the 'multiplicity of actors, materialities, governance and economic practices' that provide care and support for those in food poverty (Williams and Tait, 2022, 1379). In terms of other types of projects, these include community shops, food cooperatives, food pantries, social solidarity stores and community cafes. What these have in common is, first, that they 'all offer other ways of addressing food poverty within contemporary and normative ideals...' (Caraher and Cavicchi, 2014) and, second, that they allow those on low income a degree of choice and dignity to purchase food at reduced financial cost rather than to receive it as a hand-out (Cooks, 2019; Midgely and Slatcher, 2021).

As well as given more attention to such 'more than food aid' approaches and projects, I want to suggest that research on food poverty needs to engage more fully with the actions of local authorities - often working in partnership with local third sector organisations - in developing food strategies to address food poverty, and other food problems, in more holistic terms. For Mattioni et al. (2022), it has been through the actions of coalitions of local actors rather than national governments that progressive food system transformation has begun to be realised. Underpinning many of these local food strategies is a systems thinking approach to food (see Ingram, 2011), whereby food is addressed as a complex web of connected components. Of relevance to the themes of this paper is the ways these strategies tend to adopt an intersectional approach, seeking to connect food with other policy areas and priorities, such as health, welfare and social housing, in an effort to provide more effective responses to food problems (Sonnino and Milbourne, 2022). What is also often embedded in these place-based food strategies is a commitment to provide 'visibility to food-related socio-economic issues and problems' (Matacena, 2016, 57), and to engage with food rights and food justice (see Smaal et al., 2021).

3. Mobilising 'more-than-food aid' approaches to tackle food poverty in the UK

Attention now shifts to the ways in which these 'more than food aid' approaches to food poverty are beginning to be mobilised by city governments and third sector organisations in the UK. I suggest that a key catalyst for this shift towards these broader and more critical approaches to food poverty has been the Covid-19 pandemic, which provided the crisis conditions that enabled and, arguably, demanded either new ways of responding to food poverty or the expansion of experimental forms of working to tackle food poverty already occurring in particular places.

3.1. Methods

To explore this implementation of 'more than food aid' approaches, the paper draws on an analysis of materials from three sources. The first, and main, data source is the UK Parliament's *Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee's* 2020 inquiry into the resilience of the food system following the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic (UK Parliament, 2020). This inquiry sought answers to four main questions, of which the second one is particularly relevant to the themes of this paper:

‘Are the Government and food industry doing enough to support people to access sufficient healthy food; and are any groups not having their needs met? If not, what further steps should the Government and food industry take?’

More than 150 written submissions were received from food supply businesses, city governments, food organisations, charities, central government departments and individuals, although most responses to question two were provided by local authorities and third sector organisations.

The second data source utilised by this paper is a digest of local food interventions produced by Sustainable Food Places⁵ in 2020, which consists of case studies of actions in 19 towns and cities across the UK during the Covid-19 period (Sustainable Food Places, 2020). These case studies were developed to provide local food partnerships in the Sustainable Food Places network with examples of good practice during the pandemic. In doing this, they also indicate important shifts towards ‘more than food aid’ approaches in particular places during this period. Third, recent vision / policy statements produced by key national food support organisations and anti-hunger campaign groups in the UK were used to assess the extent to which ‘more than food aid’ ways of working have extended beyond the pandemic period.

Materials from these three sources were subjected to a qualitative content analysis. This was based on a process of inductive category formation (Mayring, 2023), whereby categories were generated directly from the materials being analysed. These categories were then transposed into key themes and sub-themes, with these used to structure the empirical section of the paper. Two main themes relating to food aid and food poverty emerged from this qualitative content analysis: first, problems associated with existing (food aid) approaches to tackling food poverty, and second, the value of developing ‘more than food aid’ conceptualisations of, and responses to, food poverty. It is to these two themes that the paper now turns.

3.2. Critiquing existing responses to food poverty

Within the submissions to the Covid-19 inquiry, it was claimed that the pandemic had exposed the limitations and fragilities of both the UK’s food policy approach and its food aid system. In terms of the first of these, several organisations commented that the pandemic had highlighted the (problematic) lack of regulation of the food system, with central government being prepared to allow the major supermarkets to lead the main food responses to the crisis. This profit-led rather than needs-based approach to food retailing had allowed the panic buying of staple products from supermarkets at the start of the lockdown period, resulting in low-income households no longer being able ‘to shop around and take advantage of discounts and offers’ (Local Government Association⁶). Calls were made by some for a more interventionist government approach to food retailing. Scope, an organisation representing disabled people in the UK, for example, remarked that ‘government should...create opportunities for all sectors to work together to develop a consistent, well-informed response, including enabling third sector organisations to inform the approach taken by supermarkets’. For others, there was a need to go further, with Brighton and Hove Food Partnership proposing legislation ‘which ensures that in a future emergency, they [national government] are able to compel supermarkets [to] meet food need, should they fail again to step in’.

What is also clear is that the Covid-19 pandemic created an existential crisis for the food aid system. As the demand for emergency food

⁵ Sustainable Food Places is a network of local food partnerships seeking to promote sustainable food innovation in the UK.

⁶ All the submissions to the Covid-19 inquiry and cases studies provided by Sustainable Food Places are publicly available and can be found at UK Parliament (2020) and Sustainable Food Places (2020) respectively.

parcels increased dramatically during the initial period of the national lockdown, it exacerbated an already worsening food poverty problem in the UK. The Food Foundation⁷ referenced findings from a survey it had commissioned, which revealed that ‘the number of adults who were food insecure in Britain quadrupled in the first two and a half weeks of the Covid-19 lockdown’. The Independent Food Aid Network, which represents more than 550 food aid providers in the UK, stated that it had witnessed a 59 per cent increase in demand for its services between February and March 2020, with the level of need in March 2020 being 17 times greater than that recorded in March 2019, and the Trussell Trust reported an 81 per cent rise in demand for emergency food parcels amongst its network of food banks in the last couple of weeks of March 2020 compared with the same period in 2019. Summarising this position, Sustain⁸ concluded that ‘the Covid-19 pandemic and its associated economic fallout have compounded and deepened household food insecurity and hunger in the UK’ (see also Lombardozzi et al., 2021; Power et al., 2021).

This dramatic increase in the demand for food aid placed exceptional pressure on, and highlighted the vulnerability of, the food aid system in the UK. The reliance placed on older aged volunteers by food banks created a ‘staffing’ crisis following the government’s guidance that elderly people should self-isolate on health grounds. The panic buying of staple products in supermarkets drastically reduced the amount of donated food received by food banks (see also Lambie-Mumford et al., 2020). This combination of rising demand for food aid and lower levels of food donation then increased the financial costs of providing emergency food, requiring food banks to secure additional funding from other sources. As one project in Sheffield commented, ‘the responsibility to provide emergency food services has fallen onto the backs of community groups and other non-governmental food organisations, at a great financial cost to these organisations’. While several local authorities had intervened to provide emergency financial support for food aid projects, concerns were expressed about the sustainability of this situation in an era of austerity. As Cambridge City Council remarked, ‘local authorities and the voluntary sector have been able to fund and organise resources for a short-term response [but] many are now finding that resources are running out and the situation is still very unstable’.

3.3. Mobilising ‘more than food aid’ responses to food poverty

The bulk of the Covid-19 emergency food responses mentioned in the submissions and case-studies had been initiated by coalitions of local actors. Typically, these were led by a local authority and involved the establishment of a food response hub to provide both a signposting and triaging service to those in need. In several cities, these responses had built on extant networks of food support. As a representative of Newcastle City Council stated, ‘existing strong links forged by the council’s Active Inclusion team between voluntary food providers across the city have served as a foundation for this activity during COVID-19’. A similar situation was reported in Bristol, where the ‘joined-up nature of Bristol’s support network has provided an extraordinary platform for increased efficiency and effectiveness of utilising our available resources to service the most people possible, in the most appropriate way’ (Feeding Bristol). More broadly, Sustain’s (2020) analysis of local authority food actions across the UK during the pandemic period concluded that the most effective ones were those ‘tapping into existing local assets such as food partnerships and food poverty alliances’ (see also Lambie-Mumford et al., 2021).

It was suggested that the lack of any significant central government response to the food dimensions of the Covid-19 crisis provided ‘the flexibility to build on existing local arrangements’ (Local Government

⁷ The Food Foundation is a charity working to develop a sustainable food system.

⁸ Sustain is a network of organisations working to improve agri-food system.

Association) and allowed local needs to be dealt with more efficiently by place-based organisations. The unprecedented scale of the pandemic also led to the development of new forms of partnership working to address the multi-dimensional aspects of food poverty in particular places. The analysis indicates that these partnerships resulted from the necessity of ‘getting things done quickly’ but also from a desire to develop more inclusive and effective emergency actions. In relation to the latter point, the new modes of partnership working mentioned by organisations tended to be characterised by a flattening of existing hierarchies, with third sector organisations operating more on a par with local government in tackling food poverty than was the case in the pre-pandemic period.

Local food support landscapes in several cities also changed dramatically during the pandemic period. Some existing food projects were repurposed to meet changing needs. A ‘pay-what-you-can’ surplus food café in Sheffield commented that it had transformed itself into an emergency food delivery service. In Bristol, it was stated by Feeding Bristol that ‘the food support landscape during lockdown looked very different compared to pre-lockdown’, with its own research indicating that almost half of all the emergency food being provided during lockdown was on ‘newly created food sites’ (see also Lambie-Mumford et al., 2021). In other places, a range of new actors became involved in the local food support system for the first time during this period. Two examples are worthy of mention. First, some hotel chains provided ‘open kitchens’ for community groups to prepare food for those in need. Second, certain allotments and community gardens started to donate food grown on their sites to food aid centres. For example, the Cambridge Food Poverty Alliance had initiated a campaign ‘to ask people to “grow a row” for distributing fresh produce through the community hubs’.

Reflecting recent shifts in the academic literature towards a more critical appreciation of food poverty, there was broad agreement amongst food support organisations that policy interventions to address food poverty needed to focus as much, if not more, on tackling poverty than on dealing with food access. As the representative of FareShare, a surplus food distribution network, commented, ‘food handouts are not a suitable substitute for having enough money to purchase food in the first place’. The Trussell Trust referenced interim findings from its recently commissioned research (Bramley et al., 2020) to highlight the destitution faced by people approaching food banks in its network, which led it to conclude that ‘the best and most dignified way to ensure that people who are economically vulnerable have sufficient access to food at this time is to make sure that people have enough money to purchase food for themselves - whether through employment or social security’.

There was widespread support for such a ‘cash first’ approach that would ensure ‘people who are struggling due to financial reasons are supported through income, not food aid’ (Joseph Rowntree Foundation). Although Lambie-Mumford et al (2021) suggest there exists confusion over the exact meaning of a ‘cash first’ approach, there was clarity within the submissions to the inquiry, with most organisations calling for national state intervention to improve the financial situations of those on low-income. As one suggested, there exists a need for government to ‘put cash in the hands of people and not entrench the foodbank model’ (Land Workers’ Alliance). Doing this, it was claimed, would reduce pressure on food banks by ensuring that ‘people on low or no incomes can purchase healthy food for themselves’ (IFAN); it would also deliver the ‘most dignified way of support, providing certainty and choice’ (Edinburgh City Council).

Several organisations argued that the Covid-19 pandemic represented a critical moment to ask fundamental questions about existing responses to food poverty. For some, the pandemic had revealed the ‘hallowing out of [food] support’ in many local communities (Edinburgh City Council; see also Blake, 2019). Others claimed that the scale of the crisis faced by food banks during the pandemic meant that the third sector could not be expected to front the fight against food poverty going forward. Instead, central government needed to ‘act immediately and collectively across departments to address the rapidly growing poverty

driving the need for charitable food aid (IFAN). For Sustain (2020), such an intervention should contain three strands: the ‘uplifting [of] welfare [payments], legislating to make employment more secure and better paid, and funding public services’. Additionally, it was suggested that partnership working between national and local governments was required to ensure the development of adequately funded national programmes that could respond flexibly to the specific contexts of food poverty in particular places. As Sustainable Food Places commented, there is a ‘huge role for [national] government to play in implementing solutions and resourcing local responses that are effective and adequately meet local needs. This is not about one-size-fits-all solutions, but about joined-up approaches’.

Looking across the submissions and place-based case studies, there was general agreement that the ‘new’ ways of working developed during the pandemic should be built upon going forward in order to provide broader, more co-ordinated and more progressive responses to food poverty. Food Cardiff, for example, commented that extending Covid-19 modes of working would:

‘make the most of all the amazing energy and generosity that people are showing [during the pandemic] in communities all over Cardiff. Most importantly, we can help to alleviate food poverty and hardship...and by building the infrastructure and strengthening relationships between the public sector, the food industry and grassroots community organisations, we hope to see long term benefits beyond the current crisis’.

Feeding Bristol intended to ‘continue to work collaboratively and strategically with grassroots organisations and with city leaders’ to bring about ‘systemic change across all aspects of the food system’. In Birmingham, the priority for the city council was to continue to support the work of voluntary sector organisations in tackling poverty in the city but to go further, with its representative stating that ‘our Public Health Department has a significant role to play but can only move forward by working in partnership with the voluntary sector and other key organisations including those in the food sector’. And Edinburgh City Council considered that ‘although the pandemic has been disastrous for so many people, I hope that we can use the learnings as an opportunity to reset and to build a resilient food system for the long path ahead’.

3.4. ‘More than food aid’ approaches beyond the pandemic

The desire amongst city councils and local food networks to continue with their ‘more than food aid’ approaches to food poverty beyond the pandemic period appears to be shared by national organisations and coalitions working on food and poverty in the UK. An analysis of recent vision statements and policy actions relating to six of these groups - Independent Food Aid Network, Trussell Trust, End Hunger UK, The Right to Food Campaign, Feeding Britain and Sustain - reveals that all are committed to ending hunger and the need for food aid. The Independent Food Aid Network (2023), for example, states that its vision is of a ‘country without the need for charitable food aid where adequate and nutritious food is affordable to all’. The Trussell Trust (2023) expresses a similar vision, that ‘as a nation we expect no one should be hungry or destitute’ and End Hunger UK (2023), a broad alliance of various faith groups, anti-poverty organisations and food aid agencies, declares that it is working towards ‘a UK in which everyone has access to good food and no one needs to go to bed hungry’.

The Trussell Trust (2023) considers that it will be able to go some way to realising its goal by revising the ways in which its food banks operate, commenting that:

“We recognise that ending hunger is about more than food. We support and encourage our food banks to provide compassionate, practical support to people in crisis to tackle the root causes that lock people into poverty and build people’s resilience so they are less likely to need a food bank in the future.”

In addition, it has been promoting a 'cash first' approach to tackling food poverty by campaigning for an increase in the level of Universal Credit to ensure that it covers the cost of food as well as other household essentials. Ending Hunger UK has also been campaigning for structural responses to food poverty, calling for national government to work in more co-ordinated ways with civil society organisations, universal access to good food for all children and 'other action to ensure that holes in our social security system do not leave people without enough money to buy food'. As might be expected, The Right to Food campaign, which has its roots in recent food poverty activism in Liverpool, has a more radical agenda, with its ambition being to secure a 'legally enforceable Right to Food' in the UK, based on the idea that 'in caring, confident and aspirational countries, a right to food should not just be a safety net but a rope ladder to ever-higher standards of provision' (Right to Food Campaign, 2021). Its campaign is based around five proposed actions: the provision of universal school meals; the expansion of community kitchens; an uplift to the minimum living wage and social security benefit levels; ensuring national food security; and independent oversight of the right to food once implemented.

Two of these organisations are actually implementing 'more than food' aid approaches across the UK. Feeding Britain, a national network of 80 regional and local anti-hunger partnerships in the UK, is actively rolling out an affordable food club model to provide 'nutritious food and other essentials for a fraction of their retail value' (Feeding Britain, 2023). What is being offered here, it is claimed, is a 'sustainable and dignified model of community food provision, while building resilience and preventing at least some of the need for food banks' (ibid.). The food clubs it has established offer wrap around advice and support services in relation to state benefits, debt and credit and savings, with some also providing communal dining facilities. Sustain is piloting a similar type of project, which it calls *Good Food Enterprise*, with the aim of 'building community wealth, promoting local food, and making good food accessible to everyone' (Sustain, 2023). The affordable food projects that it is developing are based on:

"...low-cost trading models such as pantries, community cafes, food coops and other community food projects [that] allow service users to get more for less, often alongside wrap around support and a space to socialise. They go beyond the food bank to re-invest income in the community and the financial security of the project." (ibid.)

4. Conclusion

In this paper I have explored what I term 'more than food aid' approaches to food poverty. I have done this in a couple of ways. First, I have moved beyond food bank scholarship to engage with work focusing on broader 'infrastructures of care' (Williams and Tait, 2022, 1379) that are emerging to tackle food poverty in different ways. This has involved focusing on other models of food assistance as well as thinking more critically about the relations between food and poverty. Second, I have considered how such a 'more than food aid' approach to food poverty is being mobilised by a growing number of public and third sector organisations - operating at national and local levels - in the UK. In discussing framings of, and responses to, food poverty in these terms and by providing an account of the shifting food support landscape in the UK, my concern has been to address what Möller (2021) considers to be a 'lack of critical engagement with "more than food" services' (855) within the published literature.

It is clear from the paper that food poverty is beginning to be addressed in more critical terms by a broad range of national organisations, local authorities, place-based food coalitions and individual food support projects, with increasing recognition of the need to move beyond the food aid model to address food poverty in more meaningful ways. The Covid-19 pandemic provided the impetus for the development of these broader approaches to food poverty. It brought to the fore the limitations and fragilities of the food aid model in responding to

increasing levels of food poverty (see Power et al., 2020; Huber, 2020). The pandemic also drew attention to the shortcomings of the state welfare policy in supporting food insecure groups. The neo-liberal workfare system that has emerged from recent rounds of welfare reform has been described as a 'complicated patchwork of generosity and withdrawing, care and abandonment' (Dickinson, 2020, 4), and it is important to recognise that 'the politics of hunger and austerity are thoroughly intertwined' (Strong, 2021, 7; see also Cooper et al., 2014). The UK government's emergency response to Covid-19 did provide a glimpse of what a more caring welfare system could look like with, for example, the uplifting of Universal Credit payments - a key benefit paid to those on low income - but this proved only to be a temporary intervention.

In some cases, the pandemic allowed for 'more than food aid' approaches to be established for the first time; in others, it facilitated additional support being given to, and an expansion of, initiatives that had been established in the pre-Covid-19 period. The absence of any meaningful national food policy intervention during the pandemic also awarded local actors, and city governments in particular, increased flexibility to develop bespoke responses that, in their opinions, were better able to meet local needs. In the process of doing this, more inclusive forms of local partnership working were developed and engagements with new actors led to the enlargement and enhancement of the food support system in particular places. In these senses, then, the emergency actions implemented by local actors demonstrated what a more progressive, co-ordinated and caring local food support system could look like. What was also apparent was a strong commitment on the part of many of these local actors to continue with these experimental forms of working beyond the pandemic period.

With key national food support organisations also committed to transitioning towards a 'more than food aid' approach, it is important that further research examines the work of projects such as affordable food clubs, solidarity supermarkets and community cafes, as well as the actions of those local authorities and place-based networks that are seeking to develop more progressive local food strategies. I would also suggest that additional work is needed on the interconnections between different forms of food support projects to understand 'who is taking responsibility to enable care and how caring capacity might be further enhanced' (Williams and Tait (2023, 1379). That said, it is critical that attention remains on the central state's responsibility to prevent its citizens from growing hungry (Cooper et al., 2014). As Blake (2019) suggests, questions need to be asked about how national government, local authorities and third sector organisations can work together to 'create the conditions whereby self-organising is allowed to flourish without at the same time removing the safety nets that plunge people into immediate crisis and imposes longer-term damage on communities' (19).

It will also be vital to examine the effectiveness of different models of 'more than food aid' in addressing food poverty. To date, there has been little evaluative work on the impacts of these alternative approaches. Key questions need to be asked about how well different models and practices can tackle some of the financial elements of food poverty; develop sustainable ways of working that rely less on charitable funding; develop voluntary labour and food donations; bring in more fresh, sustainable and locally-produced foods; develop social and communal relationships with food; provide more dignified responses to the needs of those living in food poverty; and engage in more meaningful ways with those experiencing food poverty in the (re)design of food and wider support services. In addressing these questions, it is crucial that researchers engage with those living in food poverty as well as those involved in the design and implementation of these 'more than food aid' approaches.

Another area of potential research concerns the changing and, perhaps, competing, relations between the food aid and 'more than food aid' models, and their associated organisations and networks. To what extent can the 'more than food aid' approach be scaled outwards - to other local spaces and other places - and upwards - to form the core of

national level interventions on food poverty? If its work can be broadened in these ways, then what will this mean for the future of food aid projects, and food banks in particular, given their near hegemonic status within the contemporary welfare landscape? Will this be a smooth and universally accepted transition, given the statements made by the Trussell Trust and IFAN about doing away with the need for food aid, or a process that is fraught with tensions and conflicts? Relatedly, it will be interesting to see if those organisations promoting a 'more than food aid' approach begin to engage with campaigns for food rights and food justice, and with other social justice campaign groups to nurture broader 'coalitions of the marginalised' (Power and Small, 2022, 60; see also Williams et al., 2016).

The 'more than food aid' approach set out in this paper represents both an exciting and a progressive agenda for future academic work on food poverty. It encourages researchers to examine the food – poverty relationship in more critical terms, to broaden their focus beyond food banks and to engage with an increasingly diverse food support landscape. Approaching food poverty in these terms will allow more meaningful connections to be made across the economic, political, social and cultural realms within which food poverty exists. It will open up new possibilities for addressing structural inequalities, developing social solidarity food economies and positioning community, agency and dignity more centrally within accounts of, and responses to, food poverty. In doing these things, the 'more than food aid approach' has the potential to shift the focus of academic and political debates on food poverty from food charity to food justice and food rights.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Paul Milbourne: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Writing – original draft, Validation, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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