

Food poverty and food aid in 21st century UK: a view from anthropology

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4/3/2017

Where does responsibility for food poverty lie and are there permanent solutions to it? Ahead of her Mary Douglas Memorial Lecture, [Pat Caplan](#) outlines some of the issues with the way we understand food poverty in the UK, and explains why we need to re-think our approach towards food aid.



Exact figures may be disputed but there is little doubt that social inequality and poverty are growing in the UK. Around four million people suffer from food insecurity, which means being hungry at least some of the time. There are even reports of people being hospitalised for malnutrition and claims of several deaths from starvation.

As an anthropologist who has worked for several decades on issues of food and food security in both Tanzania and India, I was shocked to discover in 2014 that a significant proportion of the UK population was currently experiencing similar problems to those encountered in much less developed economies. How could this be possible in one of the richest countries in the planet?

I started to investigate by studying food poverty and forms of food aid at the micro-level in two areas of the UK, one in the north London borough of Barnet and the other in a more rural part of west Wales. Much of my research has taken place in food banks and included interviews with both clients and volunteers, and serving occasionally as a volunteer myself.

Food poverty needs to be understood in its social context in order for long-term solutions to be found. It is this kind of fine-grained ethnography which enables connections to be made between the state and its policies, the market, and the voluntary sector.

While wages have risen very little if at all in most sectors and benefit entitlements have often been cut, some people turn to food banks as a coping mechanism. In the UK today, the main food bank charity, the Trussell Trust, has more than 400 such centres and there are likely to be at least as many independent food banks. They rely on long-life food donated by the public in supermarket and school collections.

The usual reasons for coming to a food bank include problems with benefits (including sanctions which means no benefits at all for a period of weeks), low-income and debt. Some clients have chronic problems, like this man:

I used to live in a middle class area of London and cared for my father. But when he died I lost both the flat, which was rented, and my job both at the same time. So I lived in my car for 3 years. Then I got another job, but it didn't last because I had back problems... I am on pension credit which is paid every two weeks and I don't have to pay council tax but it's not enough to live on and pay energy bills, loan from bank, TV licence etc. I come here every Monday and it's 'thank goodness for the food bank'.



Others encounter a sudden emergency with which they cannot cope financially:

I used to work in administration, specialising in human resources. My problems developed after my husband deserted me and our 3 kids, as a result of which I had a mental breakdown and couldn't work. So I went on to benefits but these were stopped because I had ticked the wrong box on the form. I have been to the food bank a couple of times and found the people there very friendly. I also had food given to me at Christmas by the food bank.

Food bank client in north London

Most food banks are run by volunteers, often out of churches, like this woman:

I heard about the food bank from my church, which had an item in the newsletter... People (clients) are here because of benefit cuts, sickness leading to loss of work, unemployment, disabilities, domestic violence, bills piling up. There are extremes of people who are so angry and bitter that it is difficult to talk to them, while others are so grateful they burst into tears and hug and kiss you. Often these people live alone, so they also come for company, they have a tea or coffee and feel slightly loved and cared for...

Volunteer at a north London food bank

Each food bank has a manager (volunteer or paid) one of whose responsibilities is to keep track of food, clients and volunteers:

Last year we gave out 1300 food parcels, of which roughly 300 might be to returnees (that is the national average). That means we fed 1000 people in a town with a population of 5,000. The main problems are benefits cuts and changes which account for maybe 60% of the people we see. When their circumstances change, benefits are cut until the new status comes into force. That might take several weeks and meanwhile people have nothing. Another is housing. I am expecting a client just now. She and her partner, plus their children, have just moved out of half-way accommodation. They are lucky – they only spent 8 weeks there before getting re-housed. But others spend many months in such places.

Welsh food bank manager

Alongside the problem of food poverty is one of food waste and surplus, which is generated by the food and restaurant industries, and by domestic consumers. While making use of the waste coming from restaurants is difficult, but not impossible, that generated by food retailers can be redistributed provided it is not past its 'sell-by' date.

A number of organisations, including well-established ones like FareShare and Foodcycle and more recent local additions, such as the Felix Project in London, collect food surplus from both wholesalers and retailers such as supermarkets. They use this to supply charities like homeless hostels, women's refuges, and breakfast clubs which turn it into meals for their clients. Recently, FareShare has made use of an app to develop the FareShare FoodCloud, partnering initially with Tesco (and, more recently, Waitrose) to allow surplus food to be collected daily by different charities in a managed and monitored way.

It may thus appear that using the considerable surplus generated by the food industry and ensuring that is it channelled to organisations dealing with food poverty constitutes a win-win situation, effectively a problem solved.

In my forthcoming lecture in memory of the distinguished anthropologist Professor Mary Douglas, I shall be using some of her work and my own to argue against such a view. The late Professor Dame Mary Douglas was a prolific writer on many topics, one of which was food. Like other anthropologists, she was interested in the social and symbolic aspects of food and her work encompasses economics and social policy. Douglas maintained that giving out food was rarely the solution to more fundamental problems of poverty, a lesson which has been re-learned a number of times in contexts ranging from famine in Africa to food insecurity in the USA.

She argued rather that obtaining food should come from reciprocity either in the form of payment for labour or some other kind of reciprocal exchange. Where food is given out without any commensurate return, it is a form of charity which only alleviates an immediate problem, but not the reasons for its existence. Her argument draws upon classic anthropological work on gift-giving which demonstrates that gifts should not only be received (never look a gift horse...) but also returned.

It is for this reason that receiving something for nothing creates a highly asymmetrical status between giver and receiver, which is why many people feel that it is stigmatising to go to a food bank. While many clients feel gratitude for the help they receive, most also feel shame, because in accepting such help, they deem themselves to be failures. Such a view is reinforced by much of the media which views clients of food banks and other food aid organisations as 'scroungers'.

Most food banks and other food aid organisations recognise that their solutions are imperfect and hope that the need for them will be temporary, but argue that people cannot be left to suffer hunger when it can be alleviated, so 'in the meantime', their efforts remain necessary.

In the 2017 Mary Douglas Memorial lecture, I consider where responsibility for food poverty lies and how more fundamental solutions to it may be found.

Note: The above draws on the 2017 Mary Douglas Memorial lecture which Pat will be giving on 24 May. The lecture is entitled *Gifts, entitlements, benefits and surplus: interrogating food poverty and food aid in the UK*. More information is available [here](#).

About the Author

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