

OPINION ARTICLE

The normalisation of Food Aid: What happened to feeding people well? [version 1; peer review: 3 approved, 1 approved with reservations]

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V1 First published: 28 Jan 2019, 1:3
<https://doi.org/10.12688/emeraldopenres.12842.1>

Latest published: 03 Jul 2019, 1:3
<https://doi.org/10.12688/emeraldopenres.12842.2>

Abstract

In the UK, food poverty has increased in the last 15 years and the food aid supply chain that has emerged to tackle it is now roughly 10 years old. In this time, we have seen the food aid supply chain grow at a rate that has astounded many. Recently that growth has been aided by a grant of £20m from a large supermarket chain. It appears institutionalisation is just around the corner, if not already here. It also appears that there is far greater emphasis on dealing with the symptoms as opposed to solving the root causes of the problem. As an opinion piece, this paper reflects on some of the prevalent issues, and suggests some ways forward.

Keywords

food poverty, food bank, food rights



This article is included in the [Sustainable Food Systems](#) gateway.

Open Peer Review

Approval Status 

	1	2	3	4
version 2 (revision) 03 Jul 2019				
version 1 28 Jan 2019			 	

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Competing interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Grant information: The author(s) declared that no grants were involved in supporting this work.

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How to cite this article: Caraher M and Davison R. **The normalisation of Food Aid: What happened to feeding people well? [version 1; peer review: 3 approved, 1 approved with reservations]** Emerald Open Research 2019, 1:3 <https://doi.org/10.12688/emeraldopenres.12842.1>

First published: 28 Jan 2019, 1:3 <https://doi.org/10.12688/emeraldopenres.12842.1>

Introduction

Why are you talking about food banks existing, if you don't talk about why they exist? It's like pouring water into a boat that's leaking. There's no point in me giving the information about what we need to do to help, when you're not talking about the root cause of it. Hayley Squires, star of the film 'I Daniel Blake' in an interview in the Observer Magazine. (Nicholson, 2017)

So here we are in 2018, 76 years after the Beveridge Report of 1942, and children and families are going hungry and the government is using the crises to restructure the welfare state and to develop a new 'austerity localism' which is not fit for purpose (Taylor-Gooby, 2012). There is a lot of talk about purported solutions, such as Universal Credit and food banks. What is needed is a re-visitation to the principles of the Beveridge report and that of the founding fathers of the NHS which are 'we are all in this together', the guiding ethic of the gift relationship and the greater good (Titmuss, 1968). Charities providing free food can be seen as fine and noble but the right to food is a societal one and one enshrined in human rights legislation not charity provision (De Schutter, 2013). The UK is signatory to the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Waterstones: Amnesty International UK, 2013), and the growth of food banks is undermining the state's duty and obligation to respect, protect and fulfil the human right to food - both legally and morally.

We both work in the areas of food and food projects albeit from the perspectives of practice and academia, with between us 60 years of experience in these areas -we were young when we started. What we agree on is that we have never seen it so bad. There is a need for a grass roots response to the problems and for practitioners, academics and politicians to bring to public attention how dire the situation is with children and families going hungry (Scott *et al.*, 2018). One of us (RD) created and has led a good food organisation for 11 years, 'Can Cook' see Figure 1. Though this organisation, RD has taught over 15,000



Figure 1. Can Cook.

people to cook, developed and produced meals for schools and care homes, campaigned to feed hungry people well and, as part of food poverty work, distributed over 85,000 free nutritious meals. As a practitioner, RD has argued against the orthodoxy of the mainstream food aid movement and for a food supply system that is predicated on people's dignity, health and wellbeing, rather than their crisis; he has in his practice established alternative systems of food supply for communities. The other (MC) has worked on food poverty from an academic viewpoint and is distressed by the promotion of solutions to hunger as a one of logistics and charity as opposed to being seen as a (human) right (De Schutter, 2013).

The shame and indignity felt by individuals and their families who cannot afford or access food in a society where food is abundant is not acceptable (Anonymous, 2017; Garthwaite, 2016; (van der Horst *et al.*, 2014). While the presence of food banks might feel 'rather uplifting' to the likes of Jacob Rees-Moog, the MP for NE Somerset (BBC News, 2017), this is not a sentiment usually felt by those who are driven to use them. As RD has previously said:

#foodpoverty—we are not far from that 'institutionalisation' moment when the big offer will be poor-food-for-poor-people... Robbie Davison Can Cook Liverpool on Twitter.

Contrast this with comments from Michael Gove who said 'They've only got themselves to blame for making bad decisions' (Chorley, 2013). Even Jamie Oliver has admitted he does not understand food poverty but this did not stop him making the following comment:

I'm not judgmental, but I've spent a lot of time in poor communities, and I find it quite hard to talk about modern-day poverty. You might remember that scene in [a previous series] Ministry of Food, with the mum and the kid eating chips and cheese out of Styrofoam containers, and behind them is a massive fucking TV. It just didn't weigh up. The fascinating thing for me is that seven times out of ten, the poorest families in this country choose the most expensive way to hydrate and feed their families. The ready meals, the convenience foods (Deans, 2013).

By implication, 'the poor' are portrayed as feckless, referral to and use of food banks are now indicators of caring concern and according to some 'shows what a compassionate country we are'. Glaze & Richardson (2017) found that under UK governments between 2010–2016 food poverty was seen as primarily a failure of personal responsibility and identified primarily with the working class, based on the assumption that those in poverty make poor choices.

Making moral judgments about groups and communities is not helpful and it serves to perpetuate an ignorance that many are willing to accept as the truth. We beg to differ and agree with the point that Winne makes when he said we should 'no longer praise the growth of food banks as a sign of our generosity and charity, but instead recognize it as a symbol of our society's failure

to hold government accountable for hunger, food insecurity and poverty' (Winne, 2008).

The [S]ins of food banks

We do not intend to go into detail on the workings of food banks in this piece as we assume the reader has a working knowledge of the UK situation. In summary there are over 2000 food banks operating in the UK, roughly split equally between being Trussell Trust franchises and independent food banks. The Trussell Trust emphasises that most of the food they distribute is donated by members of local food banks, based on a standardised shopping list of non-perishable food. FareShare do not operate food banks or pantries but act a 'wholesaler' providing food to food banks and other food charities, which is sourced from surpluses in the food system.

So what is wrong with food banks? Poppendieck's seven deadly 'ins', set out in Table 1 below, show the weaknesses of the current system of food banking (Poppendieck, 1998).

FareShare claims that the use of surplus food that would otherwise go to waste is appropriate. FareShare reported that they received 13,552 tonnes food between March 2016 and March 2017, this provided 28 million meals in 1,300 towns and cities through 6,723 charities with an estimated value to the charities of £22.4 million (see FareShare presentation). Using Poppendieck's model this can be seen to be both inefficient and often inappropriate. It is also an operational model that appears to be over-claiming its impact. In 2008, Alexander and Smaje identified that of the foodstuffs FareShare redirects, 68% ends up on people's plates, 58% in people's stomachs and 40% is returned to the waste stream (Alexander & Smaje, 2008). More recently, and taking a practitioner perspective as a FareShare customer, Can Cook, a Liverpool based food enterprise, ended up disposing of over 60% of all foodstuffs delivered, due to the restrictions of the *use before* dates or

because the products could not be converted into meals (Can Cook, 2017). Both studies indicate that surplus food products are much less likely to convert into meals and large amounts of additional food waste is being transferred from the private sector into and at cost of the third and public sectors.

Poverty, Universal Credit and the 'feckless poor'

A Food Foundation report found in excess of 4 million children were living in poverty and could not afford a healthy diet (Scott *et al.*, 2018). Universal Credit (UC) is a new government scheme to rationalise a number of existing welfare schemes under one payment. This has led to the impoverishment of families and along with a further £10 billion of planned cuts to the welfare budget the situation is about to get worse for many. These are not branded as cuts, as they are about raising entitlement levels and removing some from the benefit. This will result in a fall of entitlements of £5.5 billion, thus leading to increases in childhood poverty and relative poverty (Hood & Waters, 2017). Research shows that the main users of the Trussell Trust network were from groups who have been most affected by recent welfare reforms and the move to the new system of UC (Loopstra & Lalor, 2017).

Due to the way the system of UC is being rolled out, individuals end up being sanctioned for various breaches of the regulations; this results in many households facing inconsistent income and/or financial ups and downs with many being one paycheck or welfare payment away from crises (Hills, 2017; Royston, 2017). It is tough out there for many individuals, families and communities. Armstrong (2018) documents how changes in welfare and health care are impacting on many; he tells the story of DIY dentistry. We used to say the difference between the UK and the USA was the provision of free health care, and while that is still free at the point of delivery access and changes to the way dentists are paid to provide a service has made it harder to access for some.

Table 1. Poppendieck's seven deadly 'ins'.

The seven 'ins' + inequity	How they manifest
Insufficiency	Depends on individual donations or industry food surplus not related to demand but supply driven.
Inappropriateness	Charity to people and dependency on food donations/surplus food. Reliance of food aid charities on what is available that week and many find it necessary to source food from elsewhere.
Nutritional inadequacy	Inconsistency of supply makes it hard to plan for a healthy intake or food basket of goods.
Instability	Reliance on food donations whether local food donations or from the food industry.
Inaccessibility	Location of food banks, opening hours. Assumes that the charities supplying food through luncheon clubs etc. are meeting the need. There is a hidden or unmet need. Gatekeepers control access to the system.
Inefficiency	Redistribution of charitable food donations/surplus food is unsustainable and does not address the underlying causes of food poverty.
Indignity	Associated stigma of receiving charitable food aid as opposed to the right to food choice in a socially acceptable way.
Inequity	Feeding people versus providing people with the means to feed themselves. Food banks are not in every town or village and opening hours may mean they are not accessible to all.

The research indicates that families and households in poverty firstly turn to community and family networks for help, then to other sources such as pay-day loans before turning to charity (Booth, 2018; Getting By?, 2015). Networks are not being supported or developed to continue to support families and communities, not only is the welfare state being reformed and cut-back but services such as education, health and childcare are also suffering similar cuts. Of course many see the problems as being about the mismanagement of resources at the individual and family levels and many see the solution to this as being located in the provision of cooking and budgeting classes again tackling the symptoms rather than the causes (Caraher, 2018). We both have spent decades working and writing on cooking and see it as an important skill, but people are not in poverty because they cannot or do not cook, they mostly don't cook as they are living in impoverished situations.

The data shows that the 'rich' are less skilled at cooking, but of course they don't have to as they can buy their way into health and healthier food (Adams *et al.*, 2015; Caraher & Lang, 1999). Poverty may, however, be preventing those on low-incomes from cooking. A nutritionist from Public Health England commenting on the 4 million in poverty said: *'This report suggests £6 per day for an adult; we are currently spending about the same amount eating poorly'* (Butler, 2018). We would argue that this misses the point of living in poverty and worrying about income. It is not just about not having enough food or money for food next week, it is about a continuous and on-going pressure of what and how to eat. Such entreaties to change behaviour and manage within existing resources also misses the point about people's ability to shop well and conveniently. A recent report from the Social Market Foundation, indicates important limitations such as:

- Food accounts for up to 15% of the total budget for the poorest 10% of the UK population; and
- 8% of deprived areas in England and Wales are 'food deserts' (Corfe, 2018).

This is similar to the findings from the Fabian Society which showed that there is a 'poverty premium', with those on low-incomes often having to spend more on accessing and cooking food (Tait, 2015).

From some other perspectives the introduction of UC can be conceived as a declaration of war on 'the poor' (Caraher, 2018). The principles underpinning UC view those not in work as 'not deserving' and the sanctioning of people and their subsequent removal from benefits are based on their not doing enough to seek work. This is part of wider campaign to discredit welfare provision as frivolous and welfare recipients as incompetent (Geiger, 2016; Hills, 2017). The numbers in work are rising but this work is often associated with part time and poor employment practices (e.g. zero-hour contracts) and lack of security, which UC is not fit to deal with. The problem seems to be an old-fashioned view of employment as full time and continuous.

Food poverty does not exist in a vacuum; low-income households are more likely to be resource, fuel and land poor as well

as more subject to financial shocks to the lack of savings and resources. Statistics compiled by the (DEFRA, 2016) show that those on low-incomes, between 2007 and 2010, adapted by trading down to cheaper products and saved an average of 4%. The percentage spend on food is highest among households with the lowest twenty per cent of earnings/income (16%); after housing, power and fuel food is the largest item of household expenditure (DEFRA, 2017). Far from being feckless the evidence shows that those on low-incomes have adapted their diets in the face of austerity (DEFRA, 2012). The (DEFRA, 2016) report stated that:

food prices (in real terms) increased 11%. In 2008-09, the median income for low-income decile households reached its lowest level, 17% below that of 2002 -03. Small decreases between 2011 and 2014 were partially reversed 2014 -15 when income increased by 2.7%, coinciding with a 2.0% fall in food prices (page 18).

Now trading down, for many, means accessing a food bank.

Families and communities are the points of first resource not food banks yet current policy puts these under pressure. Eight out of ten people in food poverty do not use a food bank, so where do they go (Caraher, 2018)? The problem is seeing poverty as a single issue, there is a need to address poverty and food poverty in a cross-sectoral manner and in doing so, develop solutions focused on people's dignity (The Scottish Government, 2016). In this respect questions arise as to the extent that food banks or food charity to be appropriate responses, and it is to this issue we now turn.

Inappropriateness - Food banks as charity

While meeting a need for food, food banks can be classified as successful failures (Lorenz, 2012; Ronson & Caraher, 2016). They are successes in the public eye as they seem to offer a solution, failures because they cannot address the roots of food poverty. As the UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights said in his interim report on the UK:

The voluntary sector has done an admirable job of picking up the slack for those government functions that have been cut or de facto outsourced. One pastor told me that because the government has cut services to the bone, his church is providing meals paid for by church members. But that work is not an adequate substitute for the government's obligations. Food banks cannot step in to do the government's job, and teachers—who very well may be relying on food banks themselves—shouldn't be responsible for ensuring their students have clean clothes and food to eat. (Alston, 2018, p 15)

Food banks and food charity do not address the fundamental socio-economic causes of poverty nor why the food system is producing surplus or waste (Riches & Silvasti, 2014). Riches and Silvasti have called nations that use food banks and donations as a major provider to low-income people and communities 'food bank nations'. This withdrawal of the state from welfare leads to the re-establishment of the concepts of the deserving and undeserving poor, as food is not perceived a right. This can result in

more indignity and inequity. (De Schutter, 2013), the UN Special Rapporteur for Food (2008–2014), said that:

Foodbanks are a testimony to the failure of public authorities to deliver on the right to food and should be neither a permanent feature nor a substitute for more robust social programs. Food assistance in the form of the right to social security, such as cash transfers, food stamps or vouchers, can be defined in terms of rights, whereas foodbanks are charity-based and depend on donations and good will. There can also be a sense of shame attached to foodbanks (page 9).

Models based on charity and more waste/surplus in the food system are expanding (Caraher & Furey, 2017). Recently, the website *foodbanking.org* claimed, ‘hunger is often not the problem, its logistics’. The implied direction of travel here is: if only we could get more surplus food, we can stop hunger. Joining in, we now see Feeding Britain and Church Action on Poverty (CAP) both favouring surplus/waste models. One example is the pantry model led by CAP. It is a membership model that allows members to purchase the same or similar food products supplied by FareShare and given away free by food banks. Essentially, charging poorer people for donated food.

Successful failures are built into the model around more waste food for more ‘poor people’, so success for the industry in terms of good publicity and disposal of their waste, a failure as it is, is inappropriate – ‘leftover food for leftover people’ (Caraher & Furey, 2017) and nutritionally inadequate for those in receipt of the food – all dressed up as a solution. In a presentation by FareShare they stated that ‘when we saw the problem of UK hunger we found a solution. It’s simple really’. The location of the solution as one of logistics and getting surplus or waste food to people belies the indignity of having to rely on charity for basic needs.

Like in the USA, the UK charity sector welcomes new alliances. The links between the largest UK food aid charities and the food industry are becoming bigger business, reference the £20m Asda donation to FareShare and Trussell Trust to expand their logistics and strengthen their food bank networks. According to the two charities in question, these are models based on the increased supply of surplus/waste food from the private sector into the food aid chain (ASDA, 2018). Why should we be concerned about the links between food aid charities and the food industry? Fisher (2017) draws our attention to the increasing number of links with the food industry such as FareShare’s links with Coca Cola; where a donation was made to the 2016 Christmas appeal when individuals’ bought a Coca Cola, this was a move beyond using surplus or waste food (see [here](#)).

As we were writing this piece an example came from the US where a trade war has resulted in tariffs by China being imposed on US food products. This means that there is a surplus of pork, apples, cheese, figs, peanut butter and orange juice. The Trump Administration will buy these products worth \$1.2 billion and distribute them to food banks. This means that food banks will receive 950 million pounds (weight) on top of the 700 million

pounds they usually handle. The food bank trade association, Feeding America, is calling for \$200 to \$300 million to pay for distributing the excess burden of food donations (Calvert, 2018). Marion Nestle in her commentary on this asks should we not ‘Ensure that food banks are unnecessary?’

Media reporting appears to treat food banks and users of food banks differently from other welfare and dependant recipients, this is possibly due to the volunteer and dominant faith-based nature of the endeavour (Wells & Caraher, 2014; Wells & Caraher, 2017). This allows both FareShare and the Trussell Trust as the largest food aid charities, to retain an emotive ‘high ground’ regarding their service output. In addition, the supermarket/church/charity supply alliance, is convincing the general public that the job of food poverty is being tackled. Collection points in supermarkets/churches for those who can give to feel better about themselves are creating a disconnect between the general public and the lived realities of UK food poverty.

Food quality and Food Inequality

Food poverty refers to a healthy diet rather than just a lack of food (Ravillion, 2002). The food aid parcel offered by mainstream food banks is at odds with people’s need for healthy and socially acceptable diets, often providing up to 20 items of processed goods to feed a family. Moreover, what can no longer be ignored are the harmful consequences of insufficient food and or food of poor nutritional value, particularly for children (Child Poverty Action Group & Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, 2017)

In 2010, The Trussell Trust had just 78 food banks, now collectively the entire food aid network comprises of 2,009 food banks (May, 2018). Within this growth, according to the Trussell Trust, they gave out 1,332,952 3-day food parcels in 12-months (2017/18 accounting year). What links most food aid provision and the food aid parcels dispensed is the lack of quality and social inequality of the food. There is a need to link dietary and nutritional quality with social appropriates and meal preparation (Caraher & Furey, 2018; Hughes & Prayogo, 2018).

It is estimated that as much as 50% of a regular food aid parcel will remain unused by the family receiving it because it cannot be used to create meals (Can Cook, 2016). The same food parcel does not cater for specific dietary requirements so where do people go who are vegetarians or suffer intolerances? Most food aid parcels are composed of processed and often ultra-processed goods, largely edible only as individual products and as a barrier to family eating. The same parcel is made up of products categorised as being part of the so called ‘Western diet’ (Caraher & Furey, 2018). A diet consisting of products containing high-levels of added sugar, processed meats, minus vegetables, fruits and wholegrains, is a diet that can lead to negative health consequences, e.g. obesity, type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease and cancer (Monteiro *et al.*, 2018).

We know that when people are poor and hungry, they have less cognitive control and their performance drops, poor nutrition and forms of hunger leave a persons’ brain impaired (Mullainathan & Shafir, 2014). Yet when dealing with the

benefit system and a poor waged economy, hungry people are expected to more than cope, they are expected to thrive and this whilst being 'gifted' some of the worst food products the modern food system produces. The food aid movement has a responsibility to step aside from reinforcing the worst of modern food habits and move onto a platform that actively strives to promote food quality, food equality and regardless of a person's circumstances.

Academic engagement/Third Sector projects and poverty porn

Too often, what we call the 'poverty porn' narrative points towards the media and others outside the food aid chain (Garthwaite, 2016). Maybe now it's time to look inside.

Academics are themselves now engaged in a game of 'poverty porn' providing descriptions of what it is like to live in poverty or to use a food bank. There are numerous studies, sometimes funded by food banking agencies, focused on the same 'lived experience'. Sure, some of this was required in the early stages of the current crisis to see what it is like, now it is expounded in the popular press and same academic literature with little real understanding of what it is like to live in poverty and struggle. This misses the point of locating food banks within an unacceptable framework of delivering 'poor food to poor people'. We call for academic research that takes a more critical look at the framing of food aid in the UK and beyond. That proposes more radical solutions that are co-created with those experiencing food poverty that deliver healthier diets.

The same or similar applies to the Third Sector, who are drawing down large amounts of funding, often enrolling academia, in programmes that appear to be more relevant to the on-going running of the organisations themselves rather than wanting to protect the health of people who are hungry (Anonymous, 2017).

An alternative case study

So can we offer a practical solution? RD leads Can Cook and their Good Food Areas (GFA) model, Figure 2 below. This looks to change the direction of travel by offering a food support model that trades locally (but can expand nationally) and is wholly about people's wellbeing, nutrition, choice, and importantly, job creation. This is not dissimilar to the model of a local closed economic system proposed by organisations such as the Ellen MacArthur Foundation.

The GFA model produces and distributes food as a social enterprise. The type of social enterprise we favour is the difference between charity and justice (see Robert Egger's website), it is entirely a product of social need (Davison & Heap, 2014). The GFA model is locked into raising the capacity and aspirations of local people. Figure 2 depicts how food can be transported from farms directly onto peoples' plates, with minimal waste and generating social impact that implicitly understands people as they struggle with disadvantage.

Translated the model operates by;

- Recycling surplus farm food with the purpose to produce meals.
- Inviting surplus food aid suppliers to channel usable goods into the production stream.
- Removing all random donations and mitigating food waste.
- Producing fresh meals to be eaten in schools, any other community facilities and in homes.
- Anchoring schools and their food consumption for wider community benefit.
- Tackling 'food deserts' by providing a local retail option.
- Allowing people to shop locally with or without income.



Figure 2. Good Food Area.

- Supplying fresh meals into food banks to offer hungry people choice
- Creating employment throughout the food distribution chain.

Importantly, it is a model that can scale up to sit within a town or city or scale down to fit into a village. Clearly such an approach needs funding and proper evaluation measures built in.

Conclusions

Political activist and musician Tom Morello says that '*Hunger Is a Crime*' (Blistein, 2012) and like Martin Luther King, Jr we believe that '*[T]he arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice*'. Here the long arc needs to be shortened as people suffer and there are societal consequences, such as more ill-health and distress. We suggest that there are solutions to poverty and food poverty but we need a co-ordinated approach and a broader approach than just looking at food within charity provision and the effectiveness, efficiency debates within the foodbanking system (Garrone *et al.*, 2014). This needs to be accompanied by public support, as currently the ways in which welfare is talked about and the descriptions of those in receipt of welfare is negative. Official data tends to promulgate the myth that the majority of the welfare budget is spent on unemployment and tax credits - in fact only about one in every £14 is spent on social security, employment and tax credits. Pensions absorb, by far, the greatest percentage of the welfare budget. Often official descriptions of poverty and welfare are an attempt to undermine public trust and perceptions of welfare provision (Geiger, 2016).

As the food aid movement grows, does it allow the political 'right' to claim that the partnership between the private sector and non-profit organisations, rather than the government, can best solve the hunger problem? (Fisher, 2017). Politicians, on the right of the political spectrum, locate poverty within a moral failings mind-set and cycles of deprivation, where the culture of poverty is handed down from one generation to another, despite limited evidence for this (Hills, 2017). We note that is not a matter of traditional Labour versus Conservative political fault lines but one that crosses party lines.

One of the problems facing those proposing alternatives to food bank provision is that the public perception of food banks is that they are providing a service which is necessary and based on volunteer labour and a sense of charity (Anonymous, 2017). But, the replacement of a right to food and the guarantee by the state to uphold that right in favour of a move to charity does not bode well. Food banks and food charities possess a limited ability to answer the social and material needs of people.

In '*austerity Britain*' as severe cuts in welfare provision make the life of many people precarious many people across the UK face a new reality of poverty and social exclusion (Anonymous, 2017). The growth of the charity sector is not a way forward in tackling food poverty and food exclusion. There are many new initiatives developing a way forward through food democracy

with people having a say in their food choices and involvement based on community ownership and mutuality. Some of these have merged from food banks not satisfied with the mere provision of charity (Owen, 2014).

Any campaign/research focus should not be on how to make food parcels more healthy and nutritious but to ensure families have adequate income to afford a healthy diet. (Caraher & Furey, 2018) showed that under current welfare incomes it is not possible to purchase a consensually agreed and nutritionally adequate food-basket.

For those in receipt of welfare, there are two issues which need to be tackled to address food poverty: the first is the restoration and recognition that existing benefit levels are inadequate to access a healthy or socially acceptable diet; the second area that requires attention is lowering the gap between incomes and food prices. Although personally we feel that UC should be abandoned. Discussions about the social and nutritionally adequacy of food bank parcels distract from the bigger picture of poverty and food poverty.

Changes need to be reconfigured for the times but the principles of caring concern, the greater good and the right of individuals and families to food, are universal and timeless. Above all, we need leadership which looks beyond the provisions of emergency food via food banks. Where is this? Our contention is that leadership is lacking in both the academic and practice fields.

The right to food is more than that contained in Article 22 of the Human Rights Declaration (Waterstones: Amnesty International UK, 2013), it also incorporates feelings of justice and concern for your fellow citizens. There is a loss of empathy in British Society and this is an issue of concern. This is currently missing in the policy narrative and in leadership to deliver a long-term solution to food poverty. There is an argument that the current welfare changes occurring under UC are in breach of the terms of a letter sent to countries by the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights that requires that austerity measures should not contradict human rights (Caraher & Furey, 2018, see chapters 2 and 5).

Food projects were more inclusive in the 1990s and 2000s, serving food that could be eaten communally or as meals (Caraher & Cowburn, 2004; Caraher & Dowler, 2007). Now most of the activity has been taken over by the foodbanking movement and it's here we should act with caution. Food banks and the larger food aid charities have little expertise, yet talk of solutions to food poverty and being 'nutritional'. Their story and direction is of logistics (as this paper has highlighted) and franchised growth (food banks). Good food and good food knowledge do not feature. It is a story and direction that requires quick and radical change, if the tide of hunger is to be stopped and people are to be respectfully, fed well.

There is a need to move to solutions which include the voices of those impacted by food poverty. This means not just looking to hear their experiences and research on them but to include

them as experts in food poverty. People want to find ways out of poverty, so there is a need for regenerative models that move beyond charity and include the employment for people that have previously been hungry. All this needs to be accompanied by research and evaluation of what delivers sustainable, equitable and socially appropriate food on people's tables. Research needs to link national changes in welfare provision with what the local can achieve. The ability of the third sector to address hardship as a result of national policy is limited and research needs to contextualise this within a framework of 'austerity localism' (Dagdeviren *et al.*, 2018). Finally, research

needs to focus on proximate causes and solutions to these, not a band-aid or research that simply props up or expands the existing system by making it more efficient, but possibly less just.

Data availability

No data are associated with this article.

Grant information

The author(s) declared that no grants were involved in supporting this work.

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Open Peer Review

Current Peer Review Status:    

Version 1

Reviewer Report 26 February 2019

<https://doi.org/10.21956/emeraldopenres.13908.r26300>

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 **Flora Douglas** 

School of Nursing and Midwifery, Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen, United Kingdom

This is a timely provocation paper from Caraher and Davison that draws attention to the ongoing entrenchment of the charitable food aid industry in UK, which has emerged as a de facto public policy response to the increased prevalence and incidence of household food insecurity in this national context. These trends have continued apace since the global economic crisis of 2007-2008 and the introduction of 'austerity' UK government policy.

The paper provides an overview of the recent historical development of the rise of emergency aid/food banks in the UK, and its political and economic antecedents and determinants. This overview is grounded in the personal experience and perspectives of both authors who come from long standing frontline community and academic food work backgrounds. The paper also provides a useful snapshot, contemporary account of the pejorative individual/behavioural explanations that have tended to dominate the public discourse about food insecurity in the UK and calls for actions to change public understanding and discourse to enable more effective, rights-based social policy responses to be enacted to tackle the root causes of the problem. The paper's main arguments seem to centre on two substantive points.

One focuses on the view that the UK public is not fully aware of the inadequacy of the emergency food aid response in dealing with the problem, that there is a need to overturn a perceived lack of compassion within the UK that exists toward the plight of those on low income, and that income maximisation is the most effective means of addressing the food insecurity in the UK.

Another argument centres on the perceived need for more policy and academic leadership to help address this public misconceptions about the causes of household food insecurity and the more effective and socially just means of dealing with it. This argument is based on their perceptions that there is now sufficient extant research that has focused on lived experiences of food bank users in the UK, and that there is a need to look beyond this arena and develop research that takes a more 'critical look and the framing of food aid in the UK and beyond'. Indeed the authors believe that there is a real risk that academics and the third sector actors will become complicit in entrenching food aid here if there is no change to the research and evaluation direction. This a fair

point, and one that as someone working on the same area, I can accept with some caveats. While there has indeed been more research of food bank users experiences in recent years in the UK, this was not the case till fairly recently¹. And the voices, experiences and perspectives of people who are living in extreme poverty but who are not using food banks to survive are still relatively absent from the literature. Furthermore, the impact that poverty and food insecurity is having on daily living activities such as health condition management and infant and maternal feeding practices and routines are also absent from the literature. There are a number of 'knowledges' (not just the public's) that are in need of development in this area in the UK. This includes those health and social care professionals who have become de facto referrers and gatekeepers to food banks, and therefore unwittingly, arguably also complicit in propping up the emerging food bank status quo. What do we understand about this interface, and what might be done to influence it and harness health and social care professionals as public health advocates with towards the goal of ensuring that everyone in the UK is able to feed themselves a healthy and sustainable diet, and not have to rely, as passive recipients, on public and corporate largesse to survive. The authors also talk about the need to develop more compassion in the UK, which I have sympathy with too; but it seems to me it's the stories of real people that seem intuitively to have the greatest potential to change minds here. Paradoxically, food banks are arguably very public displays of compassionate action, and the explosion of those in the UK does indicate that many are not lacking compassion, but perhaps the means to channel it in a more effective direction?

While I think the paper is an important and positive contribution to current debates on these issues, there are a few gaps and inconsistencies within in that are important to be aware of. Firstly, the right to food is not enshrined in UK law, for although the UK is a signatory to the ICESCR, there is no statutory means of holding the UK Govt to account on the right to food². Meanwhile, within the UK, the Scottish Government is currently consulting on its Good Food Nation Bill and is signalling an intention to incorporate the right to food in Scottish law³. This would mean that, if this became law, the Scottish Government would be held to account for ensuring that all citizens are able to progressively realise their right to food, and be able to access to nutritious and sustainable food, by having access to sufficient household income through a combination of gainful employment, measures to reduce living costs, and social security. The Dignity Report published by the Short Life working Group on Food Poverty, commissioned by the Scottish Government and published in 2016 championed the incorporation the right to food in law as a means of protecting people's right to food in Scotland, and this is an alternative policy viewpoint that might also be useful to draw attention to in this article.

In addition, I thought it a bit strange to see that the Good Food Area model presented in the paper as an alternative approach, which sounds like an interesting idea, includes the concept of so-called 'good food banks' which seems at odds with the main thrust of the article? It would be good to see more explanation of what this concept means in practice and how this sits with the cogent arguments contained in this article that argue against charitable feeding programmes and the historically popular 'teaching the poor to cook' type policy responses to poverty and food poverty.

Nevertheless, perhaps the most useful and important contribution the article makes is the attention it draws to the deficits and disconnect that exists between the claims of the gleaning food industry in the UK, in terms of their purporting to address food poverty and reducing food waste. An examination of the nature and dietary quality of the food being supplied to the charitable food system by the main food industry gleaners is long overdue in the UK. This alliance is clearly catering for the most vulnerable members of our society⁵⁶, and this paper provides some

glimpses of its inadequacy and provides some evidence that might start to challenge public and policy understanding and any emerging complacency around the notion that those groups are being adequately served by this system.

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Is the topic of the opinion article discussed accurately in the context of the current literature?

Yes

Are all factual statements correct and adequately supported by citations?

Yes

Are arguments sufficiently supported by evidence from the published literature?

Yes

Are the conclusions drawn balanced and justified on the basis of the presented arguments?

Yes

Is the argument information presented in such a way that it can be understood by a non-academic audience?

Yes

Does the piece present solutions to actual real world challenges?

Yes

Is real-world evidence provided to support any conclusions made?

Yes

Could any solutions being offered be effectively implemented in practice?

Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of

expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.

Reviewer Report 18 February 2019

<https://doi.org/10.21956/emeraldopenres.13908.r26302>

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Rebecca O'Connell 

Thomas Coram Research Unit, UCL Institute of Education, University College London (UCL), London, United Kingdom

The think this piece usefully brings together recent food poverty research and activism with classic academic texts into an overarching narrative that explains why the dominant response to food poverty in the UK is not only inadequate but also dangerous. As a researcher in the food/poverty field specialising in one particular area I found this overview very helpful for learning about recent research and developments in other areas. The empirical example of the GFA potentially gives it a unique stance but feels a bit thrown in at the moment. In my view it should be better worked up, using empirical examples from practice if these are available, and showing how it contrasts to other (food bank type) approaches. In a couple of places there are statements/assertions that need to be supported by evidence. There are also places where the argument and text need tightening up and the article needs to be thoroughly proofed. Some more detailed comments/queries/points are listed below.

Page 2 (van der Horst... brackets in wrong place
Jacob Rees Mogg not Moog

P3 existing not exiting and welfare not welfares schemes

Last para p 3 (dentists) needs a comma somewhere

P4

First sentence - I am not sure the research does show this. i.e. I am not aware of a recent UK study of food/poverty that looks as temporal sequencing of coping strategies? I think it is safer and truer to say that people draw on a range of options depending on need, norms and what is available/accessible??

Second para - the data show not shows

'Food accounts for up to 15% of the total budget for the poorest 10% of the UK population' I would have said it was more than 15% for the lowest decile? Check against Defra figures (Family Food)

Statistics compiled by the DEFRA should be Department for Then brackets

OK so this is the same stat as above but in quintiles - do you need the social market foundation

figures too? I would omit

Strange floating sentence after Defra indented quote. Also is it many or some? Contradicts next point about only 2/10 using a food bank. More helpful to refer to Liz Dowler's point (see chapter in Riches and Silvasti 2014) that those on the lowest incomes cannot trade down as are already on most basic of diets.

Page 5

The example about China trade tariffs is intriguing but a bit unclear. Say something (more) about 'food as commodity' and how this relates to other conceptualisations of food as e.g. a right?

Food poverty refers to a healthy diet... should be the 'lack of a' healthy diet

Page 6

Define poverty porn

I tend to agree. But think you could be more explicit – the trouble is with research ONLY looking at experiences and not identifying social causes?

Currently the GFA model is a bit high level – sounds like the beginning of a proposal rather than something that is in action - can you explain how it works in practice - perhaps give an empirical example of a place it operates and some of the outcomes and how these compare to charitable responses?

Page 7

The first bullet point 'Supplying fresh meals into food banks to offer hungry people choice' is v problematic in my view! It contradicts so much of the previous discussion – why the sudden rhetoric of consumer 'choice' and 'hungry people'? Does this aim not contribute to entrenchment of food banks? 'Let's make food banks better'? If this really is an aim it needs adequate justification given the preceding argument.

Official data tend not tends

Although personally we feel that UC... Does this belong here? This paragraph a bit muddled.

There is a loss of empathy...evidence? Some would suggest good banks provide evidence to the contrary...?

Food projects were more inclusive...This seems to me to be an important point of the article. Maybe you can talk about the GFA in these terms

'...have little expertise' - in what?

Overall needs a good proof read including adding full stops/commas to break up some long sentences.

Is the topic of the opinion article discussed accurately in the context of the current literature?

Yes

Are all factual statements correct and adequately supported by citations?

Partly

Are arguments sufficiently supported by evidence from the published literature?

Partly

Are the conclusions drawn balanced and justified on the basis of the presented arguments?

Partly

Is the argument information presented in such a way that it can be understood by a non-academic audience?

Partly

Does the piece present solutions to actual real world challenges?

Partly

Is real-world evidence provided to support any conclusions made?

Partly

Could any solutions being offered be effectively implemented in practice?

Partly

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Families and food

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

Reviewer Report 12 February 2019

<https://doi.org/10.21956/emeraldopenres.13908.r26299>

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Emma Boyland 

Appetite & Obesity Research Group, Department of Psychological Sciences, University of Liverpool, Liverpool, United Kingdom

This paper offers an impassioned plea for change in the way we view and tackle food poverty in the UK. It (deservedly) delivers strong criticism of the current model, but, importantly, also offers

solutions. The blend of academic and practitioner knowledge and expertise is a real asset to the piece, and as an academic who sits at the surface of these issues (a band of ivory tower folk rightly highlighted in the article itself) these words need to be heard and heeded by my sector and beyond. The work is clearly topical, and much needed, and will be of significant interest to a variety of stakeholders.

Very minor (possibly pedantic) type editing points that you may or may not wish to address:

- Might the first line of the main body be updated to 2019 to reflect the date it was first published?
- When referring to a specific Government, there should be an upper case G
- The first line under the heading "Poverty, Universal Credit and the 'feckless poor' might benefit from a year to give context, i.e. this many children were living in poverty *in 2018*
- Page 3 Table 1, typo in the right hand column for inequity ("opening hours my mean...")
- If it's possible I wonder whether the authors might want to add in reference to the (eventual) acknowledgement today by Amber Rudd that rises in food bank use can indeed be linked to the policy car crash that is Universal Credit (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-47203389>)
- Page 4 it appears awkward where it says "Statistics compiled by the (DEFRA, 2016)" and "The (DEFRA, 2016) report" and perhaps this could be adjusted to have DEFRA out of the brackets and just the year in brackets
- Page 4 this sentence is also problematic "In this respect questions arise as to the extent that food banks or food charity to be appropriate responses..."
- Page 5 I found this sentence hard to follow "Successful failures are built into the model around more waste food for more 'poor people', so success for the industry in terms of good publicity and disposal of their waste, a failure as it is, is inappropriate – 'leftover food for leftover people' (Caraher & Furey, 2017) and nutritionally inadequate for those in receipt of the food – all dressed up as a solution"
- Page 5 remove the extra "this" from "Marion Nestle in her commentary on this this asks should we not 'Ensure that food banks are unnecessary?'"
- Page 6 suggest Figure 2's title is expanded to "The Good Food Area model"
- Page 7 "Some of these have merged from food banks not satisfied with the mere provision of charity (Owen, 2014)." should that be emerged?
- Page 7 "Discussions about the social and nutritionally adequacy" - nutritional?

Is the topic of the opinion article discussed accurately in the context of the current literature?

Yes

Are all factual statements correct and adequately supported by citations?

Yes

Are arguments sufficiently supported by evidence from the published literature?

Yes

Are the conclusions drawn balanced and justified on the basis of the presented arguments?

Yes

Is the argument information presented in such a way that it can be understood by a non-academic audience?

Yes

Does the piece present solutions to actual real world challenges?

Yes

Is real-world evidence provided to support any conclusions made?

Yes

Could any solutions being offered be effectively implemented in practice?

Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Psychology, eating behaviour

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.

Author Response 12 Feb 2019

Martin Caraher, City, University of London, London, United Kingdom

Emma

Thank you for the comments and the care you took in reading this. We will check with the editorial team about making some of the corrections. As this is a new process of live review we are not sure of the procedure.

The fact that the [Work and Pensions Secretary](#) yesterday acknowledged the role of government initiatives, specifically Universal Credit, in contributing to the rise food bank usage is long overdue but should not blind us to the fact that this is still the tip of the iceberg. Many families and households struggle and make-do without recourse to food banks, drawing on firstly on family, community and friends for support, before turning to high interest payday loans. Food poverty is being driven by many factors such as employment practices, the gig economy and the growing gap between incomes and housing costs. Food is the elastic item in the household budget and the first to bend, often with negative consequences for health and wellbeing. Pat Thane in her new book *-Divided Kingdom. A History of Britain, 1900 to the Present-*, suggests a 'striking similarity between UK Poverty in 1900 and 2018'.

Again thank you

martin and robbie

Competing Interests: None. one of the authors of piece

Reviewer Report 07 February 2019

<https://doi.org/10.21956/emeraldopenres.13908.r26298>

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**Colin Sage** 

University College Cork, Cork, Ireland

The 'normalisation of food aid' is a passionate call that asks just why, in the UK at this moment, has food banking emerged as the singular solution to rising levels of food poverty? While briefly reprising some of the well-known shortcomings of food banks, Caraher and Davison are more interested in exploring the mindset that normalises these solutions over others that defend and advance human dignity. While the authors appear a little hesitant to attribute responsibility to the institutionalisation of food banking, evidence from North America (Fisher 2017¹, Riches 2018²) has demonstrated the rapid corporatisation of food poverty as food companies - and others - position themselves as 'solutionaries'. Nowhere is this most evident than in the disposal of surplus product by the major supermarkets where the problems of food waste and hunger offer a 'win-win' opportunity to present themselves in the best philanthropic light. Yet, as we know, disposing of ever greater volumes of surplus through charitable partners reinforces the logic of an industrial food system engaged in structural over-production of highly processed food-like substances. Moreover, this distribution to the 'deserving poor' does not ensure their access to a healthy diet. In work undertaken here in Cork (Kenny and Sage 2019)³ we have seen how food redistribution charities are co-beneficiaries of a broken food system that deepens, not resolves, problems of inequality. Only by developing locally-specific initiatives that focus upon people's health, nutrition and well-being in partnership with the people themselves - as the Can Cook and Good Food Area examples demonstrate - can a sustainable and inclusive solution to food poverty and injustice be realised.

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Is the topic of the opinion article discussed accurately in the context of the current literature?

Yes

Are all factual statements correct and adequately supported by citations?

Yes

Are arguments sufficiently supported by evidence from the published literature?

Yes

Are the conclusions drawn balanced and justified on the basis of the presented arguments?

Yes

Is the argument information presented in such a way that it can be understood by a non-academic audience?

Yes

Does the piece present solutions to actual real world challenges?

Yes

Is real-world evidence provided to support any conclusions made?

Yes

Could any solutions being offered be effectively implemented in practice?

Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Food systems, Sustainability transitions, civic initiatives & social movements

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.

Comments on this article

Version 1

Author Response 10 May 2019

Martin Caraher, City, University of London, London, United Kingdom

We thank all the referees for their considered comments and are working on an amended version which we hope will soon go up on the website. Here we pick up some of the comments from Flora Douglas, who provided the last review.

The context for this piece was an invited commentary from an academic and a practitioner in the field of food poverty. So we have tried to combine these two perspectives. While we acknowledge overlaps there are some points of tension between what we see in practice and what the literature is currently telling us. We hope these gaps will be filled as research begins to focus more on solutions as opposed to documenting problems.

Floras says the right to food is 'not enshrined in UK law' and in fact we never said it was, merely that it was important and that the UK was a signatory to UN conventions and agreements. We said

'The UK is signatory to the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Waterstones: Amnesty International UK, 2013), and the growth of food banks is undermining the state's duty and obligation to respect, protect and fulfil the human right to food - both legally and morally.' There are others working on the right to food and how this might be enacted, as Flora points out in Scotland but also in England. Her pointers to what is happening in Scotland are important and worth keeping an eye on. However, we also believe that measuring food insecurity and enshrining a right to food do not necessarily help with solutions to tackling or solving the issue. The right to food and measuring food insecurity are important and necessary but on their own are insufficient to tackle the problem of food poverty and insecurity. Measurement in the US and Canada have allowed tracking of the problem of food insecurity but not changed much, the situation in both countries has got worse. Some countries with a formal 'right to food' such as India and Brazil have had moderate success but this has been held back by a lack of investment and resources. As we argue for these development in measurement and the enshrinement of a legal right to food austerity bites deeper and communities, families and individuals suffer.

Our contention that food banks and food banking as a movement are undermining collectivism and replacing it with a compassion based on charity, still stands. Of course individual food banks volunteers and workers care but the point is that this is charity often based on compassion for those less well off rather than as De Shutter (2013) notes based on rights. The individual stories and cases from food banks reported in the media portray caring concern often without any real examination of the underlying cases of poverty and food poverty (Wells, Caraher, 2014). This individualisation of hardship and reporting undermines the concept of the 'great good' which the NHS and welfare state was built on. We activities and public health practitioners need to rediscover and rebuild this narrative. We make the distinction between food banks and food-banking as a movement, this latter concept is based on continued growth and helping people through surplus food and charity (Ronson, Caraher, 2016).

Flora and some of the other commentaries have said that 'good food model' sits uneasily in the context of the piece. We as authors thought it was important to finish with something that was positive and showed what was possible. In presenting the 'good food model' we are presenting from a field or practitioner perspective one alternative to food insecurity. We are sure there are others out there and we would like to hear about them

A sincere thanks is due to all the referees in this open review process. We are amending the piece and hope to address many of your concerns within word limits imposed by the journal etc; but your comments will stand as public statements for others to read. This process of open reviews has been a new experience for both authors and one we welcome.

A final word of thanks to all four reviewers who approached the task with diligence and integrity, thank you, see you further down the road.

martin and robbie (authors of the piece)

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Competing Interests: None author of article

Author Response 15 Feb 2019

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There is an interesting letter from Joanna Young, the chair of trustees at Morecambe Bay food bank, a Trussell Trust centre hosted at St Barnabas Church, was disappointed to miss the MPs when they visited Morecambe Bay food bank, she sent a [letter](#) to MPs Frank Field and Heidi Allen. This is powerful feedback from the cutting edge of poverty and the worsening crisis in our society. It is heartbreaking and sad that we need to report such situations.

See a copy of the letter at: <https://inews.co.uk/news/politics/food-bank-volunteer-open-letter-mps-frank-field-heidi-allen/>

Competing Interests: none co-author of original article
