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Rising use of “food aid” in the United Kingdom

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to present the findings from two recent reviews on food aid use in the UK and discuss their implications and the challenges they posed for researchers, policy makers and the voluntary and community sector.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper draws on two research reviews conducted in 2013 and 2014.

Findings – Whilst it is possible to draw important insights into key drivers of food aid use, how food aid is draw on by recipients and some of the perceived outcomes of the provision from the research that is available, ultimately the reviews highlight the emergent and largely unsystematic nature of the UK evidence base. The lack of agreed definitions and measures of food insecurity/food poverty further limits the knowledge base. Even where such evidence may be forthcoming, in terms of implementing effective solutions to the need for food aid, UK researchers, policy makers, NGOs and others face considerable challenges in terms of identifying responsibilities for addressing the causes of this need, which the most effective scale for response may be (local or national) and finally, overcoming a highly complex and not necessarily co-ordinated policy framework.

Originality/value – The paper provides a critical overview of the state of knowledge on food aid in the UK.

Keywords UK, Food security, Food banks, Food poverty

Paper type Viewpoint

Introduction

The rise of food aid provision and uptake, particularly in the form of food banks providing parcels of food for people to take away, prepare and eat, has become increasingly high profile and politicised in the UK in recent years. The country’s largest group of food bank projects – the Trussell Trust Foodbank Network[1] – reports rising numbers of food parcels distributed from just under 41,000 in 2009-2010 to over 900,000 in 2013-2014 (Trussell Trust, 2013, 2014). These data are much cited as evidence of need for emergency food provision in the UK and as an indication of an emerging problem. In 2013, research by Oxfam and Church Action on Poverty (Cooper and Dumpleton, 2013) estimated that 500,000 people were reliant on some form of food aid and Cooper et al. (2014) estimated that over 20 million emergency food meals were given out between 2013 and 2014. The growth of this charitable food assistance is situated within a context of rising food, fuel and housing costs, stagnating incomes and a wider backdrop of austerity and welfare reform (Defra, 2014; Lambie-Mumford, 2014; Cribb et al., 2013).

Interpreting these numbers and understanding the relationship they have to wider socio-economic and political shifts is therefore a key challenge facing researchers in the UK. This paper presents evidence from two reviews that the authors have been involved in examining evidence on drivers of the need for, and provision of, food banks and other forms of food aid in the UK conducted for the Department for the
Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Lambie-Mumford et al., 2014) and the Cultures and Communities Network (Dowler and Lambie-Mumford, 2014).

The review for Defra was undertaken between February and March 2013, and drew systematically on available published and grey literature supplemented by brief case studies and an expert workshop, to provide ‘understanding of the “food aid” landscape in the UK and the “at risk” individuals who access such provision, as well as the means and drivers for seeking access’ (Lambie-Mumford et al., 2014, p. iii). The second, scoping review was conducted between October 2013 and February 2014, and included an updated literature sweep, policy review and a small number of in-depth interviews with food aid recipients with the aim of “capturing narratives of food aid users to place the experience of food aid into the wider socio-economic and political contexts which surround it” (Dowler and Lambie-Mumford, 2014, p. 1).

Both reviews were subject to external review; the work for Defra was also reviewed across relevant sectors in government and, as a result, its publication was delayed by some nine months as the robustness of the evidence base was discussed in depth. The fact that a short, fairly routine, piece of work was subject to such scrutiny implies the sensitivity within government to the issues with which it engaged; indeed, the non-publication had itself become a subject of debate in the media, public health journals and in Parliament (Butler, 2013a; Taylor-Robinson et al., 2013; Hansard, 2013a, b) as more commentators recognised this implication. Its publication was rushed to coincide with a public letter from leading Church of England clergy to the Prime Minister challenging him on the morality of the current situation (BBC, 2014); the Department for Work and Pensions has consistently denied the link with social security reforms (e.g. Anon, 2014).

This paper discusses the evidence which was collected through these two research reviews on the issue of food aid in the UK. It presents the reviews’ findings on the emerging discourse and terminology and the extent of the evidence base available. In particular it explores what the evidence tells us in relation to themes of: why people go to food aid projects; how food aid provision is drawn on; and what some of the outcomes of this provision are perceived to be. The paper goes on to discuss the implications and challenges these findings pose for researchers and other stakeholders looking to better understand and effectively respond to the drivers of need for food aid in the UK.

The situation in the UK
A particular terminology is emerging in the UK and “food aid” is increasingly being used by policy makers and NGOs (Cooper et al., 2014; Hansard, 2013b). This terminology is utilised in a way comparable to that of the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra, 2013) to encompass a range of different types of short-term assistance with food, beyond the provision of food parcels, to include onsite and home-based meal provision. The term “food bank” appears to be widely used to refer to initiatives which provide emergency parcels of food for people to take away, prepare and eat, although the organisation and management of such initiatives vary (Dowler and Lambie-Mumford, 2014).

Both reviews highlighted the emergent state of the UK evidence base on the nature and scale of both food aid provision and the drivers of need for it. Furthermore, experiences of food insecurity are not systematically captured nationally in the UK and the reviews observed how documenting independent initiatives is particularly difficult (Lambie-Mumford et al., 2014).
The reported reasons why people ask for help with food, particularly from food banks, while not always systematically documented in the UK, could be identified from evidence collected by national charities and providers, some of which is based on analyses from their regular monitoring systems (although these are not set up to establish or verify details of people’s circumstances) and some of which is based on purposive research. This emergent evidence suggested that key issues leading people to ask for food aid are “crises” which induce sudden reductions in household income; these include loss of a job or problems with social security payments. The “crises” appear, in some cases, to build on on-going, underpinning circumstances which mean people struggle to obtain sufficient food; for example, continual low income or indebtedness (Lambie-Mumford et al., 2014, p. viii). The in-depth narrative interviews conducted for Dowler and Lambie-Mumford (2014) supported these findings, identifying two key sets of triggers for food aid uptake for those interviewed: first, where people were highly vulnerable and with precarious housing circumstances; and second, where people were experiencing financial difficulty as a result of changes to their social security benefits, which involved either their experiencing a complete absence of income (because of sanctions[2] or errors), or sudden increased outgoings as a result of changes to housing benefit and council tax benefit. Indebtedness was another key factor in people’s struggles to balance their budgets more generally; interviewees described juggling rent and council tax arrears and their need to take out short terms loans from so-called “loan sharks” or “payday lenders”[3].

The reviews also highlighted the ways in which food aid is drawn on in the context of other forms of support and budgeting strategies. People employ many different mechanisms to try and cope with longer term or sudden difficult circumstances (including changes to shopping and eating habits, cutting back on other outgoings, and turning to family and friends for help) and the reviews indicate that turning to food aid is often a strategy of last resort, drawn on as one of many ways to manage (Lambie-Mumford et al., 2014; Hossain et al., 2011; Goode, 2012). These findings were also supported by data from the in-depth narrative interviews where most were, or had within the previous 12 months, drawn on other sources of food support (notably other food projects and Healthy Start vouchers[4]) and all (except a roofless man who had no source of income) were going to considerable lengths to manage their money – adapted shopping and eating habits around their very constrained budgets.

The evidence highlights that short-term food provision can relieve symptoms of emergency need but (necessarily, given the aims and capacity of such initiatives) does not address the underlying causes of that need (see Lambie-Mumford et al., 2014; Poppendieck, 1998; Sabates-Wheeler and Devereux, 2011; Lambie-Mumford, 2013; among many). But whilst the food security outcomes may be limited, evidence from both reviews, and from comments cited in the Defra research (Lambie-Mumford et al., 2014) from providers who were interviewed and that were made in the Expert Workshop, indicates that the non-food related support given by food aid projects (which include providing a “listening ear” or other more formal support such as signposting state help) is regarded (by providers) as a key contribution of these projects. Indeed, some providers saw this non-food support as the primary contribution charitable help offers.

**Implications and future challenges**

This current evidence base and the emerging public discourse around UK food aid has important implications and poses some immediate challenges for not only researchers
but also policy makers and other stakeholders seeking to arrive at effective solutions to the apparent rising need. The reviews presented above reveal that the evidence base is highly limited, and there remains a need for a better understanding of the drivers of increased food aid use. However, even if/when this evidence is gathered what effective interventions would look like and which stakeholders have responsibilities for implementing them are key issues which will need to be confronted.

Growing numbers of commentators use food banks as indicators of a wider problem but what exactly this problem is requires more robust, systematic evaluation. The first challenge, however, is that of defining this problem. Whilst need for food aid (broadly defined) may vary significantly in its drivers (e.g. illness or frailty leading to taking up meals on wheels, or social isolation leading to joining a lunch club), for projects established to help people with food that they otherwise would not be able to access for economic or socio-economic reasons, there remains a lack of clarity around the concepts that are used and drawn on. For example, whilst it is increasingly employed by food bank charities (Trussell Trust, 2013), the media (Butler, 2013b) and NGOs such as Oxfam and Church Action on Poverty (Cooper and Dumpleton, 2013) the term “food poverty” lacks consistent – agreed – definition in the UK, despite established definitions in research literature (e.g. Dowler, 2003). Furthermore, the term “food security”, whilst employed in policy circles (Defra, 2006), has yet to translate into public discourse and be applied to these phenomena.

Leading on from the challenge of defining limited access to food, there is a further challenge for the UK in systematically measuring it. In other countries where household food security is systematically measured using validated methods (Bickel et al., 2000; Health Canada, n.d.), the indicators are quite widely accepted and used in government analysis. There is limited experience of using a household food insecurity measure in the UK (see Nelson et al., 2007 for the only national example; and Tingay et al., 2003, for an early attempt in one locality). In the absence of such indicators, NGOs and other commentators have increasingly used food bank statistics (in terms of numbers of parcels distributed) as proxy indicators of food poverty. This is problematic for several reasons: in the first instance, these numbers by definition only relate to those people accessing food banks and cannot capture those who may be in similar need but for whatever reason are not or cannot receive food parcels; where access to a food bank is determined by “crisis” the numbers will not be capturing those experiencing lesser but by no means less real food poverty/insecurity; and the numbers can also be difficult to interpret, for example, they often do not account for repeat visits in a systematic way.

The lack of systematically collected data on drivers of need and a standardised, agreed definition which all stakeholders can use to describe the lack of economic access to food is a key challenge for researchers, policy makers, NGOs and the community sector. Looking at how in the UK we should talk about food and poverty, “food poverty”, or “food insecurity” and measure this experience would therefore be a key first step in establishing a robust evidence base from which appropriate interventions and policy responses could be identified. Even when the problem has been determined and extent of it accounted for, there will still be several key challenges to overcome in realising effective solutions including: determining whose responsibility it is to respond; determining at which scale (national or local) the most effective responses could be targeted; and overcoming the complexity of the policy framework surrounding the issues involved.

In the first instance there is the question of what roles and responsibilities reside within the state and charitable sectors in particular. Frameworks such as human rights
approaches can provide the UK with important starting points for understanding these responsibilities; particularly in the form of the human right to food (see Dowler and O'Connor, 2012; Riches, 2002). The rise of food banks and attendant response implies that responsibilities for ensuring access to food are devolving from the state to charities, or churches and faith groups, or local communities. Such a shift is not uncommon in other developed economies (see Riches, 2002 for Canadian account), but is to date occurring quite rapidly, and undisputed, within the UK. There seem to be no mechanisms for debating the appropriateness of these shifts, the extent to which they are desired by different citizens and providers, and how accountability can be ensured. Therefore within the context of these shifts, the questions remain of what the different responsibilities of different stakeholders might be, including – food charities, the government at national and local levels as well as the food industry and groups such as faith-based organisations. There is little homogeneity within most of these groupings, and (structures such as the Local Government Association apart) little mechanism for discussion of issues or coordination. The All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Hunger and Food Poverty in Britain, which was collecting evidence at the time of writing, could potentially provide one forum for these discussions (APPG, 2014).

A second challenge involves disentangling national, regional and local distinctiveness of problems and the appropriate responses required. Given the push for localism that in some instances dominates the current political agenda, a key question is then the extent to which local communities can and should respond to problems of food poverty/insecurity and immediate vs longer term needs, and where national government has to be accountable for protection and or support. Again, few of these issues are being seriously discussed, and there are few fora to enable sustained examination.

Even when some of these challenges are overcome potential issues lie in how policy makers will be able to respond. The second research review (Dowler and Lambie-Mumford, 2014) tried to map triggers to food aid use (as evidenced in existing research) on to the wider policy context and identify key policy levers. The review noted that Whitehall government has not yet developed policy responses to increased food aid uptake and growing numbers of food banks in the UK, nor have the devolved governments, despite, for instance, the Scottish Government’s willingness to take the wider issues into account (Sosenko et al., 2013). Given the nature of the triggers to uptake highlighted by the reviews the policy context is complex and far reaching, incorporating numerous Whitehall departments, devolved and local bodies. Whilst an adequate evidence base may provide the foundations for identifying and agreeing roles and responsibilities and appropriate scales of response, how effective policy solutions could be implemented within this complex framework will necessarily require further exploration.

Conclusion
Whilst the evidence base in the UK is currently slim, what exists conveys the urgency of the need experienced by food aid users. Dramatically reduced or completely halted incomes appear to be driving individuals and families to food aid providers and this emergency food seems often to be drawn on within the context of complex household food and budgeting strategies.

There is no sign that increasing uptake of food aid is abating. This makes the UK’s lack of a systematic nation-wide evidence base on drivers of this use particularly concerning. Agreeing definitions for describing limited access to food and
implementing effective measures will be a necessary pre-requisite for effective responses from stakeholders across the policy and voluntary and community spheres. Where evidence-based interventions can be identified, it will require commitment from across all stakeholders to successfully implement these if the trends in rising food aid use are to be halted or reversed.

Notes

1. The Trussell Trust manage a network of not-for-profit foodbank franchises (which make up the foodbank Network). Individual foodbanks are set up, run and managed by groups of churches in local communities across the UK and the Network now comprises over 400 foodbanks. Food is collected from within the local community and the vast majority is privately donated and sourced through supermarket drives, schools and local businesses. Foodbanks provide parcels of emergency food designed to last up to three days and each parcel contains a prescribed combination of long-life food stuffs. To obtain a food parcel recipients are required to get a voucher from a frontline professional working within the local community (e.g. a doctor, health visitor or advice centre). For more information see: Lambie-Mumford, 2013; and www.trusselltrust.org/how-it-works (accessed 24 April 2014).

2. “Sanctions” refers to situations where the payment of benefit is withheld because claimants do not meet conditions set. The majority come through JobSeekers Plus Centres, and can be for 4-26 weeks or longer. See: www.gov.uk/government/news/benefit-sanctions-ending-the-something-for-nothing-culture and www.adviceguide.org.uk/wales/benefits_w/benefits_benefits_in_work_or_looking_for_work_ew/benefits_for_people_looking_for_work.htm#h_jobseekers_allowance_and_sanctions

3. Organisations which offer immediate, short-term loans – often of small amounts and often with little examination of people’s financial capacity to service debts – to those who could not otherwise obtain such accessible cash, but which charge very high rates of interest to cover likely default.

4. Healthy Start vouchers are an entitlement to milk, fruit and vegetables, for those who are pregnant or have children aged four and under, and who are claiming some means tested social security benefits.

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Further reading

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