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Sheffield.

SPERI Paper No. 18

# Addressing Food Poverty in the UK: Charity, Rights and Welfare.

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ISSN 2052-000X

Published in February 2015

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## Executive Summary

Since 2000 there has been a proliferation of charitable emergency food provision in the United Kingdom, which has expanded particularly fast in the last five years. Whilst the provision of food to people in need by charitable organisations has a long history in the UK, the formalisation of this provision and its facilitation and co-ordination at a national level is unprecedented in this country.

This research looked at the rise of emergency food provision in the UK and at the implications of this phenomenon for the realisation of the human right to food. It focussed particularly on exploring two aspects outlined by the notion of the right to food: the adequacy of emergency food provision explored in relation to questions of acceptability and sustainability; and what the rise of food charity means in terms of the state's duty to respect, protect and fulfil the right to food. The research involved the collection of extensive qualitative interview data from two of the UK's biggest national emergency food charities.

## Key Findings

1. The research found that emergency food initiatives were important spaces of caring and social solidarity in local communities.
  - They embody moral imperatives to feed the hungry and overcome social injustice.
  - They also provide care to those in need in various ways – beyond food – including providing personal support, a safe space, and other advice or signposting.

However, by right to food standards these projects are problematic.

2. These systems are ultimately not adequate or sustainable by right to food standards which emphasise the importance of the social acceptability of food acquisition, on the one hand, and the sustainability of food access into the future, on the other:
  - Emergency food provision forms an identifiably and experientially 'other' system to the socially accepted mode of food acquisition in the UK today – the commercial food market through shopping.
  - Providers are not necessarily able to make food available through these systems, with their ability to do so shaped in important ways by the structure of the food industry in which they operate; in addition, people do not always have the ability to access emergency food projects and the food available from them whenever they wish, for as long as they may feel they need.
3. The research indicates that the state is, if anything, retreating from its duty to respect, protect and fulfil the human right to food and emergency food provision is assuming the responsibility to fulfil this right, where it can and in its own way.
  - There is a close relationship between welfare reform and the rise of food charity, with recent reforms to social security driving the need for and influencing the shape of emergency food provision.

- Whilst the rise of emergency food projects could well represent the increasing responsibility held by civil society-based social protection, the right to food approach sets out clearly that the state is the duty-bearer.
- Shifts from entitlement to charity (which is not a right and accessible to all) is a particularly problematic aspect of the contemporary shift in food-based social protection from a right to food perspective.

### Implications and Recommendations

To move towards a more effective set of responses, we need to conceptualise the problems (in the shape of the need for emergency food) and the solutions to that need in terms of rights, solidarity and care. The human right to food provides an important framework for focussing on solutions which see food as a social good; and sees access to food as a social aim and ethic which states, alongside other actors and their citizens, can work together to achieve in a progressive way. There could well be a role for food charities within this, but a social and political role, rather than a food-based role.

Recommendations for stakeholders in working towards the progressive realisation of the right to food in the UK include:

- Emergency food charities should emphasise and focus on their social and political contribution to progressive responses to food poverty and realising the human right to food in the UK.
- Policy makers nationally should begin a consultation on a right to food strategy which should in turn be adopted to guide tangible policy responses which also draw on other actors and hold them to account.
- NGOs should engage more with rights-based discourses to guide their campaigning and advocacy. NGOs should also maintain a focus in their work on holding government to account over the rise of food poverty and the UK's increasing reliance on emergency food provision.
- The food industry should engage with the issue of food poverty beyond supporting food charity as part of its corporate social responsibility. The industry – specifically retailers – should also look at fairness across their food chains.
- Local communities and individuals should, in addition to their engagement in the work of helping others in their social networks or through getting involved in an emergency food project, join wider discussions at local authority, devolved and national policy levels around food poverty and the right to food.
- Researchers should engage more fully with the right to food framework and seek to develop constructive ways forward for its realisation.

## 1. Introduction

Since the turn of the century we have seen the emergence of charitable initiatives providing food to people in need on a widespread scale in the United Kingdom. Whilst the provision of food to people in need by charitable organisations has a long history in the UK (McGlone *et al.* 1999), the formalisation of this provision and its facilitation and co-ordination at a national level is unprecedented in this country. In the year 2013-14 the largest food banking organisation, the Trussell Trust Food-bank Network, distributed 913,138 food parcels to adults and children across the country, up from 128, 697 in the year 2011-12 (Trussell Trust no date). The last few years have been particularly formative for the emergency food movement in the UK - not just in terms of operation as illustrated by these statistics, but also in terms of public profile and political discourse with widespread national news coverage and increasingly intense political scrutiny (see Morris 2013, BBC Radio 4 2014, Channel 4 News 2014 amongst many and the report from the Parliamentary Inquiry into Hunger and Food Poverty (Food Poverty Inquiry 2014)).

The proliferation of these charitable initiatives has occurred within a context of economic crisis, recession, public finance austerity and welfare reform, all of which are impacting on people's economic security and ability to eat well. Incomes have been lagging behind rising costs of living, including housing, fuel and food prices (Davis *et al.* 2014) which has had the overall impact of reducing the affordability of food by over 20 per cent for the poorest income decile since the mid-2000s (Defra 2014). Public sector finances have also been subject to a programme of significant cuts, some of which are yet to kick in, and there has been a high profile agenda of extensive welfare reform which has introduced caps to entitlements, increased conditionality and an ethos of individualised risk. The growth of emergency food provision has therefore occurred at a time of significant social and political-economic shifts which are impacting in real terms on the adequacy of household income and the level of state support people can access.

This paper presents findings from recently completed research into the rise of emergency food provision in the United Kingdom and the implications of this phenomenon for the realisation of the human right to food (Lambie-Mumford 2014). The aim of the paper is to provide practitioners, policy makers and other interested researchers with the key findings from the study and reflections on the most progressive ways forward. The full account of the research and the analysis can be found in the citation immediately above.

### *Policy Context*

The growth of charitable emergency food initiatives has been and continues to be an increasingly high profile issue and has sparked reaction from all sectors including NGOs, the media, the private and public sectors. There has also been considerable political reaction from politicians at local, devolved and national levels (for example, see Hansard 2013). Used by some as evidence of a failing welfare state and others as evidence of community responsiveness, these have until recently remained rhetorical reactions and have yet to translate into substantive policy responses, driven by elected members of Councils, Assemblies or Parliament. The

most significant step made towards any kind of substantive response came in December 2014, after the completion of the research, with the launch of the report by the All Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Hunger and Food Poverty in Britain (Food Poverty Inquiry 2014), the implications of which are discussed in Lambie-Mumford (2014b).

Despite the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) commissioning a Rapid Evidence Assessment on food aid in the UK (Lambie-Mumford *et al.* 2014), at the national level there has so far been a lack of policy response from policy makers within related government departments. Notably from Defra which has responsibility for household food security, the Department for Work and Pensions which oversees social security, the Department for Communities and Local Government which oversees planning regulations or the Department of Health which oversees nutrition policy. Whilst officers in Devolved and Local Governments have worked on various responses, such as grant funding or food strategies, these have been local and often short- or medium- term responses (see Dowler and Lambie-Mumford forthcoming). This absence of national-level policy response may in part be explained by a general lack of policy ownership of issues of food poverty or household food security. Currently, Defra has responsibility for 'food security' (see Defra 2006). But even where food security issues intersect with areas of specific responsibility there appears to be little engagement with the links between, for example, income levels and hunger or retail provision in local communities from other key Whitehall departments such as the Department for Work and Pensions or the Department for Communities and Local Government.

### *Charitable emergency food provision and the welfare state*

The growth of emergency food provision, since the turn of the century but particularly in the last 5 years, has occurred in parallel to significant changes to the welfare state. Since the economic crash in the mid-2000s we have seen a programme of extensive cuts to services which form part of the welfare state and widespread reforms to social security – what some have termed an 'age of welfare austerity' (Farnsworth 2011, p.251). This fits onto a wider historical trajectory of shifts in the shape and nature of the welfare state since the 1970s and particularly since the beginning of the New Labour years in 1997 which saw the increased and more formalised role of the voluntary sector in welfare services through programmes of diversification and a consequently more formalised and professionalised voluntary sector generally. In the context of the current Coalition government (2010-2015) this process of diversification has continued under the policy platform of the 'Big Society' – based on an ideology of localism and transferring power to individuals and communities (Cabinet Office 2010). Food banks have come to be seen to represent key elements of this re-shaped welfare state. As Ellison and Fenger (2013 p.616) observe:

For the current Coalition government in Britain, food banks are viewed as a positive translation of the ideology of the 'Big Society' – a mix of libertarian paternalism and communitarian forms of social solidarity.

The contemporary era of austerity and welfare reform raise two particularly im-

portant issues when considering the growth of emergency food provision in the UK: first, how these dynamics are driving need for food banks and other forms of emergency food provision (particularly in the case of public finance austerity and social security reform) and, second, how they may be shaping the nature of the food charity response (particularly in relation to 'Big Society' policies and how more recent historic shifts in the shape and role of the voluntary sector may have paved the way for highly professionalised national-scale organisations).

### *The research*

This paper presents findings from a study of the nature of emergency food provision in the UK and involving an empirical investigation into how it works as a system and a critical engagement with the phenomenon, specifically from a right to food perspective. It assesses UK emergency food provision against key criteria of the right to food perspective, focusing on the adequacy of this system of food acquisition in relation to the social acceptability and the enduring sustainability of the provision, and explores where responsibility lies – in practice and in theory – for ensuring everyone has the ability to realise their human right to food.

Given the capacity of the research and the changing nature of this provision during the lifetime of the project, it was not possible for the research to provide a systematic account of the drivers of growth of emergency food provision across the country in recent years. A focus on the implications of this growth was seen to be important given the urgent questions that this growth poses for researchers, policy makers, the voluntary sector and the individuals and communities that are struggling to access food. Employing a right to food analysis was a key innovation of this research; whilst elsewhere in the Global North researchers have been working to apply the right to food approach, illustrating its analytical utility and real-world applicability (for example Riches 2002, 2011), in the UK very little published work has attempted to do so (see Dowler and O'Connor 2012 and Lambie-Mumford 2013 as exceptions).

The research employed two particular aspects of the human right to food to form an analytical framework for presenting the research findings, as set out by the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1999): the emphasis placed on the adequacy, acceptability and sustainability of food; and the responsibility that is placed on states to respect, protect and fulfil the human right to food. The research drew on empirical evidence from the two largest national charities involved in the facilitation or co-ordination of emergency food provision in the UK – the Trussell Trust Foodbank Network and FareShare. Extensive qualitative research was undertaken with these organisations and data was collected in two stages: from local emergency food projects in several areas across the country; and at the head offices of the national organisations themselves. 52 interviews were conducted over the period of a year (September 2012 – October 2013).

### *Critical engagement and criticism*

Emergency food projects embody numerous social performances, motivations and interactions and the research found these projects to be vital spaces of caring



and social solidarity in local communities. However, given the underpinning focus on food poverty and human rights, the research also engaged critically with the growth of these initiatives on a national scale. This is not the same as criticising the work done in these projects or the moral imperatives that drive them. Instead, it involves asking bigger questions of other stakeholders and situating such provision within a wider context of current and possible responses. Some may suggest that such analyses are luxurious: that whilst volunteers in local communities are working hard to keep projects going and to help those in need, they do not have the time to ask such big, abstract questions. But these are important and urgent questions, nonetheless, to which policy makers and other stakeholders in the voluntary and community sector are seeking answers.

## 2. The Problem and its Solution: Food Poverty and Food Rights

'Food poverty' is a concept which can be used as a specific way of interpreting the 'problem' which leads people to seek assistance from emergency food providers; and the right to food as a way of envisaging not just the solution to these experiences but a more comprehensive approach to the realisation of socially just food experiences for all. Put another way, the concept of food poverty is employed to understand the 'problem' and its determinants – how need for emergency food provision manifests itself – and the right to food is used as a framework for identifying a progressive way forward for overcoming it.

### *Food poverty*

The first challenge faced by research into constrained food experiences is the variety of, sometimes overlapping, language used to describe the experience of lack of access to food (Lambie-Mumford and Dowler 2014). 'Hunger', 'food poverty' and 'food insecurity' are all utilised and recently food poverty and insecurity have come to be used interchangeably in the UK (see Dowler and O'Connor 2012). The idea of food poverty arguably has more resonance in the UK when applied to household level experiences (see Dowler *et al.* 2001, Hitchman *et al.* 2002, Lang *et al.* 2010, Cooper and Dumbleton 2013, BBC News 2014 and Oxfam 2013). 'Food security' on the other hand – although having applicability to the issue of individual access to food – has often been used particularly by UK government to refer to national food supply issues and global or national food systems, rather than being fully utilised for the household and individual-level insights it can bring (see discussion in Kneafsey *et al.* 2013).

The conceptualisation of food poverty utilised for this paper encapsulates a broad notion of a dynamic process, one that is experienced differently by different people who have active agency in how they manage their lives within the structural determinants constraining their food experiences (Riches 1997; Lister 2004). Ultimately, food poverty is understood as relative to different societies and as a construct of those societies. This conceptualisation was actioned within the context of this research by the definition offered by Dowler *et al.* (2001):

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 (see Dowler *et al.* 2001, p.2 and taken from Radimer *et al.* 1992 cited in Riches 1997).

This is a definition which takes account of the key composite dynamics of access (broadly defined), acceptability and adequacy, and security in the longer term. It is a definition which highlights the importance of food for social participation and the value of aspirations and equity. Experiences of food poverty are seen through this interpretation as more than a symptom of poverty; they are treated as a site of analysis in their own right, as a set of experiences which both result from and contribute to social exclusion and injustice (see also Lambie-Mumford forthcoming 2015). Those experiencing food poverty can be seen as active agents within this experience; whilst their agency may be constrained by the structural determinants of their food experiences, notions of ‘personal agency’ and the ways in which people ‘get by’ in these circumstances can be accounted for (see Lister 2004 for an analysis of agency and structural interpretations of poverty). Food poverty is an experience determined by structural forces, including the food production and retail system, the labour market, the welfare state and transport, housing and planning infrastructures (see Caraher *et al.* 1998, Dowler 2003, Hitchman *et al.* 2002).

### *Human right to food*

The right to adequate food was originally enshrined in Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (ratified in 1948) as part of the right to an adequate standard of living, which incorporated adequate food (UN no date). As part of the range of economic, social and cultural rights, the right to food was not ratified by states – including the United Kingdom – until the mid-1970s in the form of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR 1999) (published in 1966) (UN 2014, OHCHR 1996 and Joint Committee on Human Rights 2004). Since then, work on the particularities of the right was published by the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in 1999, specifically in the form of General Comment 12 on the Right to Adequate Food (CESCR 1999). There has also been the development of Voluntary Guidelines in support of the realisation of the right to food (Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) 2005) and, since the first appointment in 2000, the right to food has had a dedicated UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food (SR Food, no date).

General Comment 12 adopted by the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) outlines some of the ‘principal issues’ which the Committee considers to be important in relation to the ‘right to adequate food’ (CESCR 1999). The committee sees the human right to food as being ‘of crucial importance for the enjoyment of all rights’ and elaborates in this publication on both the normative content and obligations and violations of the right. The normative content found in Comment 12 asserts that (CESCR 1999):

The right to adequate food is realised when every man, woman and child, alone or in community with others, have physical and economic access at all times to adequate food or means for its procurement.

Despite close links to the FAO (2006) food security definition the normative content of the right to food is interpreted as much broader, with an emphasis placed on the 'adequacy and sustainability of food availability and access'. These are interpreted in specific ways by Comment 12:

The precise meaning of 'adequacy' is to a large extent determined by prevailing social, economic, cultural, climatic, ecological and other conditions, while 'sustainability' incorporates the notion of long-term availability and accessibility.

In detailing the obligations and violations the right imposes, Comment 12 outlines that the principal obligation of states 'is to take steps to achieve progressively the full realisation of the right to adequate food'. As with all human rights, the right to food imposes three types of obligations on states – to respect, protect and fulfil the right (CESCR 1999). In outlining accountability for the realisation of the right to food, the emphasis is necessarily placed upon states, given that they are the actors party to the CESCR. Having said this, Comment 12 (CESCR 1999) does make room for the role of people, NGOs and the private sector in realising the right to adequate food:

While only States are parties to the Covenant and are thus ultimately accountable for compliance with it, all members of society – individuals, families, local communities, non-governmental organisations, civil society organisations, as well as the private business sector – have responsibilities in the realisation of the right to adequate food. The state should provide an environment that facilitates implementation of these responsibilities.

Comment 12 (CESCR 1999) therefore provides an important outline of the detailed content and guiding principles of the right to adequate food. Two key elements derived from it form the premise of the theoretical framework for this paper: the normative content relating to the 'adequacy and sustainability of food availability and access'; and the obligations of the state to 'respect, protect and fulfil the human right to food'.

### *Right to food analysis of the rise of emergency food provision*

Each of the two elements drawn from the right to food gives rise to distinct sets of questions. Normative content surrounding the 'adequacy and sustainability of food availability and access' raises questions regarding the acceptability and sustainability of emergency food systems; and, in turn, the notion of the obligations of states raises questions around the idea of responsibility and the theoretical and practical role of charity and the state in realising the right to food.

The key findings of the research which are presented in this paper are divided into two substantive parts. The first part (3.1) of the paper explores the adequacy of emergency food provision by right to food standards by looking at the nature of the case study organisations in relation to questions of acceptability and sustainability. The second part of the paper (3.2) is framed by a theme of responsibility and the question of who is responsible for the progressive realisation of the human right to

food in the UK and where the responsibilities for protecting people from food poverty currently lie in theory and practice. Specifically, this section looks at charitable caring and responsibility and the relationship between emergency food provision and the welfare state.

### 3. Emergency Food Provision and Solutions to Food Poverty

#### 3.1 – Social Acceptability and Sustainability

##### *Social acceptability*

In order to assess the acceptability of emergency food provision by right to food standards, the research explored how these emerging systems fitted against socially established food acquisition methods – i.e. how people expect to be able to get their food. As (Meah 2013, p.197) observes, in western societies shopping for food is the most common way that people obtain food: ‘foodstuffs are distributed through a commercial system and acquired through shopping’. Participating in the commercial process of shopping defines food experiences in the UK today and this market-based experience (where people exercise choice and consumer power) is the socially recognised way in which people acquire food for themselves and their families.

The findings of the research revealed in the first instance that emergency food provision does constitute a distinctly ‘other’ system of food acquisition which sits very much apart from the mainstream ways by which most people access food today (namely, through commercial markets and shopping). The ways in which both organisations operate outside the market and the commercial system, is a key defining feature of how emergency food provision works. The food is both sourced for and acquired from these projects through mechanisms other than market exchange. It is sourced either through donations of surplus or private donations of previously purchased goods. The food is then acquired free, following a process of being identified as needy either by attending a project or being referred there. Unlike in commercial food acquisition, food is given to ‘needy’ people, as opposed to being chosen by an active consumer, and this sits outside mechanisms of economic exchange. Furthermore, compared to consumers for whom retailers make shopping as convenient as possible, recipients of emergency food have, on occasion, to go to significant lengths to obtain this food, including referral procedures and physically accessing projects in specific places and at specific times. The lack of rights of recipients (both to access this provision and also when they are inside these systems) and the reliance on volunteer labour forces further distances the emergency food system from that of commercial markets and social security provision.

The findings also reveal, however, important nuances within this process of ‘othering’, notably the fact that embedded within these systems are qualities which still link to the market (such as branding) and the moral imperatives surrounding the very injustice of people’s exclusion from food which were driving the work of these organisations. In the study of emergency food providers, the moral imperative(s)

that drive them become immediately apparent. For both organisations in this research, the aim to feed ‘hungry’ people is a central motivation to their organisational missions. The term ‘hunger’ is employed in the aims of both organisations to convey their motivation to meet need. Importantly, however, these motivations can also be seen as moral imperatives and for both organisations hunger and, in the case of FareShare food waste, is seen as unjust.

The data collected for this research could be said to support elements of Midgley’s (2013) analysis. Mirroring some of her findings relating to the process of foodstuffs transitioning from the retail market to redistribution initiatives, the data collected highlighted the importance of the surplus food discourse itself in protecting market-based qualities. Most importantly, through the inherent way that the surplus discourse (in which food for redistribution is referred to as ‘surplus food’ rather than ‘waste food’) positions the redistributed food apart from food waste. In the data collected from FareShare, discourses of surplus and an emphasis on the usability of the food (that is, in date and edible) were found throughout. This surplus discourse saw the unsaleable foodstuffs spoken of as the result of benign ‘kinks’ in the system, an unfortunate consequence rather than a stock of foodstuffs which have been rejected and/or cast away, or that is substandard or low-quality.

On the basis of this analysis and previous work by Midgley (2013), it may be that the foodstuffs entering into redistribution systems may not be all that far away from and may retain qualitative links to the commercial food market. However, the emergency food system as a whole is in fact ‘other’ in light of a range of distinguishing characteristics – including the facts that it is run by volunteers and acquired by ‘the needy’. Thus, ultimately, when food transitions into these systems it becomes part of them. The food itself may not be far away from the commercial system in which it started, but it is nonetheless no longer within it. In the final analysis, the findings also indicated that emergency food systems are experienced as ‘other’ by those who turn to them and findings relating to experiences of stigma and embarrassment indicate that this is a difficult experience for those involved.

The otherness of emergency food provision is the critical factor in assessing the acceptability of the experience of obtaining food through emergency food provision. Mainstream food acquisition experiences are dominated by commercial markets and most food obtained through shopping (Meah 2013). The neediness of emergency food recipients embodies their exclusion from this mainstream food experience and therein lies the problem for acceptability; the social injustice of exclusion from such social food ‘norms’ is key. In emergency food systems individuals become receivers of food, rather than purchasers and selectors of food – stripped of their agency and choice (a key value in the contemporary food system in the UK). Whilst the increasing prominence of emergency food provision in media and public discourses may be working to spread information about how these work, with the hope perhaps of overcoming some of the stigma or marginalisation attached to these initiatives, they are still nonetheless very different experiences of obtaining food from that enjoyed by those who are not living in acute poverty or financial crisis. This is the central concern of a right to food analysis – the exclusion, the lack of choice, the vulnerability and neediness, and the ‘otherness’ of the experience of emergency food are all highly problematic.

## *Sustainability*

Sustainability, by right to food standards, requires adequate amounts of food to be accessible in the short, medium and longer term. In assessing emergency food systems as a practical response to the problem of food poverty several points of analysis are therefore important: the ability of emergency providers to make enough food available in the immediate and longer terms; and the ability of recipients to access this food through these organisations now and into the future.

The ability to source food for distribution (either through securing surplus or private donations) and the ability to ensure on-going practice to distribute that food underpin the capacity and sustainability of the work of both case study organisations. These aspects of their work can be situated within the context of the wider structures of the food system, given both organisations' primary sourcing mechanisms: for FareShare, surplus food is taken from within the food chain and, for Foodbanks, food is donated in large part by individual donors through collections or food drives.

The findings of the research indicated that the agency of case study organisations to acquire sufficient food is shaped and determined in important ways by the structures of the food industry, particularly the food retail system in the UK. They indicate that, whilst both organisations take strategic approaches to food sourcing, FareShare is ultimately dependent on what food is made available to them through retailers' supply chains and, whilst Foodbank donations are dependent on individual giving, national food drives at high profile supermarket chains are an increasingly prominent mechanism for the network to secure donations (also bringing important added value to the franchise, saving volunteers time and energy setting up food drives themselves).

In terms of partnerships and planning to support on-going practice, the findings indicate that both organisations take a strategic approach to these partnerships and horizon scanning – particularly the Trussell Trust which appears to take a consciously diversified approach to these agreements. The findings suggest that the case study organisations exercised agency in these partnerships in particular through: maximising opportunities which present themselves as a consequence of the currently high profile of food assistance and hunger; being clear and forthright in their position when agreeing terms and conditions of partnerships; horizon scanning and planning for when short- and medium- term partnerships end; and diversifying partnership relationships as much as possible to avoid dependency. However, the findings do also suggest that the finer points of detail in these partnerships are not necessarily within providers' control and that these partnerships can have knock-on effects on the shape of on-going practice and organisational capacity to plan into the future. For example, FareShare runs food drives as part of retail partnerships when FareShare's aim is to reduce surplus and the Foodbank Network has taken corporate donations of surplus food when the act of individual donation and community giving are central to their ethos.

These findings have important implications for what we can say about the sustainability of food availability in emergency food systems, given the dangers of both organisations becoming dependent on their relationships with the food retail in-



dustry for the sourcing of food. In addition, the lack of ultimate control these organisations can exercise over corporate partnerships (including those with food retailers) means that their future planning can be limited and their on-going and future practice (in terms of what they provide and how) shaped by the terms of these agreements in ways which may not have been anticipated.

By the right to food sustainability standard, food must be available and accessible in the short, medium and longer term. The research therefore also explored the agency of potential recipients to access emergency food when they need it. The findings show that the lack of accountability of the organisations, the variable accessibility of projects and the lack of rights and entitlements of recipients mean that these systems are not able to provide sustainable sources of support for help with food.

From the data collected on how the national organisations and local projects work, several access processes have the potential to inhibit the agency of people to obtain necessary help with emergency food, namely, eligibility criteria, gatekeeping processes and limits on how much food can be obtained. In addition, logistical and procedural issues hinder access including the location of food distribution centres and the times when they are open (sometimes on only a few occasions a week, for short periods of time). Once people are in these emergency food systems however there are several key aspects which could promote recipient agency: where recipients have rights within the system; or have the ability to hold the organisations to account. Importantly, within emergency food systems, recipients are not afforded rights and the provision is not seen as an entitlement. Similarly, these charitable organisations, unlike statutory bodies or to some limited extent retailers (in terms of consumer power), cannot be held accountable to those that require the provision. There are very few, if any, accountability mechanisms that people can employ. This means that when people have accessed these emergency food systems and are situated within them they lack key mechanisms for exercising agency, such as having entitlements or being able to hold organisations to account.

The sustainability of emergency food provision in terms of the availability of food through these systems and access to that food by people in need therefore appears to be particularly vulnerable. The agency of both emergency food providers and their recipients are constrained by the structures in which they operate (the food system and emergency food systems) and their ability to access the amount of food they require is ultimately determined by these structures.

### *3.2 – Roles and Responsibilities*

#### *Charitable care and responsibility*

This part of the paper looks particularly at notions of need for and success of emergency food provision in order better to understand this provision in relation to the problem of food poverty and the right to food framework. A more normative question is also explored: about what the role of charity should be in responding to the problem of food poverty and realising the human right to food.

Care ethics provide the theoretical lens which guided this part of the analysis. The emphasis care ethics places upon structure – on the importance of structural level caring and structural determinants of need for care – aligns with the conceptualisations and definitions of food poverty (structurally determined) and the right to food (realised through structural shifts and actors at all scales working together) adopted for this paper. Specifically, the term ‘care ethics’ is used here to refer to ‘a critical ethic of care and responsibility’ (Lawson 2007, p.2). Seeing care ‘as a form of ethics’ (Popke 2006, p.506), the concept is drawn on in a way that frames an understanding of care as social. As Williams (2001, p.478) noted, care can provide a ‘lens through which to make situated judgements about collective commitments and individual responsibilities’. This theoretical approach also takes account of the complexities involved in and different scales at which need is defined and care is given. This is embedded within the idea that ‘embodied caring practices must be analysed as multi-sited [...] and as multi-scalar’ (Lawson 2007, p.6).

In examining notions of need for and success of emergency food provision, the findings illustrate that conceptualisations of need rely heavily on notions of crisis and immediacy. It is important to note that this study was focussed on emergency food projects. At FareShare food is distributed to projects working with ‘people who are vulnerable’, a broader conceptualisation of need. However, the projects visited for this research (homeless accommodation, homeless day centre, homeless meal project and refugee rights centre) all helped people who were particularly ‘vulnerable’; so whilst the notion of vulnerability may be conceptualised broadly, to cover community cafes in deprived areas or lunch clubs for the elderly, where the provision is an ‘emergency’ the populations helped are especially vulnerable and often going through an acute crisis – for example lack of housing, lack of citizenship status.

In both organisations there are practical applications of procedures which are designed to independently establish crisis or immediate need. In the case of FareShare, need is determined by those running the projects receiving redistributed food (referred to as Community Food Members (CFMs)) and for the Trussell Trust Foodbank Network by referrers who hold food bank vouchers in the community and determine need for food parcels. The findings suggest that two factors could be driving the conceptualisation of need as crises or immediate need: organisational ethics to feed ‘hungry’ people and concern for project sustainability leading to a focus on what is achievable and practical.

Looking at projects’ understanding of success in emergency food provision, the data revealed the provision of care as key. There was a sense among participants that caring was an end in itself and formed an important part of the success of emergency food provision, suggesting that there is an inter-personal site of caring within this provision and that the relational experience of the gesture of care is significant in and of itself and has value inherent within it. The way in which all kinds of emergency food projects (foodbanks and FareShare CFMs) were seen as providing places of safety also came out strongly from the data: providing recipients with a safe and supported place was seen as key. Beyond the provision of food parcels and social interaction, these emergency food projects were seen to have a wider role in terms of other direct support on offer (particularly FareShare CFMs such as homeless day centres) and/or be procedurally and metaphorically situated within



a wider network of support (through the relationship between foodbanks and referral agencies and foodbank signposting processes).

However, the findings also suggest that, whilst need and success are often spoken of in immediate terms (crisis and meeting immediate need), this in fact belies the more nuanced appreciation organisations have for the complex circumstances which underpin need for emergency food and how they understand the impact of their projects on recipients' lives. The care ethics approach enables us to see how experiences of need and the outcomes of caring through emergency food provision are indeed multi-sited. Notions of acute need develop out of a wider context of mild and moderate need and experiences of financial insecurity. Similarly, caring within emergency food systems occurs at many sites (inter-personal, project and community level) and is also situated at one of many sites at which people in poverty may be cared for (within social networks, other community initiatives, national social security and so on).

The data revealed that those running projects saw their definition of need as crisis fitting within a wider context of vulnerability to these crises, informed by experiences of poverty. Providers spoke about the way food crises embody wider experiences of poverty, precariousness and a lack of financial resilience and noted the existence of complex underpinning household and income circumstances. Conceptualisations of need for emergency food provision are therefore actually much more subtle than they would appear when talked about in terms of language such as 'crisis'. Similarly, the wider support and notions of connecting recipients to other parts of the welfare network from emergency food providers also helps us to understand where these projects fit in scales of caring. It highlights that this particular form of caring sits at one specific site among many at which people in poverty and food poverty receive care.

These findings suggest that emergency food projects in fact play a more complex role than may at first be apparent. Whilst food security outcomes from the food on offer and the mechanisms for obtaining it may be limited, emergency food providers may be playing a more important social role as spaces of care and facilitators of social support and welfare networks.

In terms of normative questions of who holds responsibility to 'care', two sub-questions emerge: who is caring in practice; and who should care and how? The findings demonstrate that emergency food charities are assuming the responsibility for alleviating experiences of food poverty in practice and that they are doing so in particularly streamlined and professionalised ways. The data suggested that emergency food providers are responsively assuming this responsibility to care, as need grows and the welfare state retrenches. However, how providers feel about assuming this responsibility is not clear cut. The findings also highlight that both organisations are streamlined and have developed a range of professionalised processes in order to be able to grow in response to rising need and to assume this responsibility in practice. In effect, this responsive growth was being approached strategically.

In terms of the question of who should care for those in food poverty, the privatisation of care that the growth of charitable emergency food provision represents is counter to care ethics approaches which advocate structural responses to caring

and the public nature of care. However, the research findings also suggest that this 'privatised' and 'public' distinction is not easy to make. Projects were found to be actively navigating between their 'privatised' and 'marginalised' work and the wider structures determining the experience of food poverty (for example, by highlighting particular causes of food crises to policy makers). Looking to the future, the findings suggest that foodbanks in particular and those associated with them have at their disposal two key mechanisms for negotiating the increasingly contested space between the demand seen in local communities and the policies and processes which are determining it: active political engagement through advocacy, publication of data and speaking into systems; and where they are Christian organisations like the Trussell Trust, the power and influence of the collective voice of the church.

### *Emergency food provision and the changing welfare state*

The focus of this part of the paper is on the role of the state in respecting, protecting and fulfilling the human right to food and, more specifically, the relationship between the changing welfare state in the UK and the rise of emergency food provision in the form of food banks in particular and how changes to the welfare state are impacting on both the need for and shape of this charitable provision.

At the outset of the research it became clear that there are several mechanisms by which Trussell Trust foodbanks demarcate the space between their projects and the 'welfare state', in particular by not entering into contractual Service Level Agreements and by maintaining discursive and practical distance through referral systems and the rhetoric of helping people who have fallen through 'gaps' in welfare systems. Having said this, there are elements of this welfare state-charitable foodbank demarcation which are problematic. In the first instance, there is a question about how far food banks, by working in practice and with a high profile to plug gaps in existing state provision, may effectively become a more formalised (albeit not necessarily state funded) part of how the welfare state operates as part of a wider system of initiatives. Also, by providing an addition to the toolkit of professionals within, in some cases, state funded services, (Lambie 2011) there is a further question of how far this provision becomes effectively incorporated within those toolkits and thereby become an *in practice* part of what those state welfare services provide. Accepting grant funding (particularly at local level) and close relationships with social security agencies including Local Welfare Assistance schemes and Job Centre Plus agents also present difficulties in maintaining the demarcation between state welfare and community foodbanks.

For the purposes of this part of the paper, when looking at welfare changes, particularly welfare reform, emphasis is placed upon recent policies to reform social security entitlements (in terms of reductions and/or conditionality) in respect of the need for and shape of food banking in the UK. It is important to distinguish this from the other side of recent cuts which have seen reductions in finance to public services that also make up significant elements of the welfare state. The impact of these cuts to services is discussed in previous writing in Lambie (2011) and Lambie-Mumford (2013) in relation to how cuts in budgets within services, such as social services and probation services, have led to professionals giving out food-

bank vouchers, where previously they had discretionary budgets or other forms of support to help people through a crisis period.

As we have seen, the growth in numbers visiting Trussell Trust foodbanks rose particularly sharply between the years 2012-13 and 2013-14 but overall, significantly since 2010 (when there were 20 foodbanks open). This growth has therefore occurred at the same time as the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government has initiated an extensive programme of reform to welfare policy in the UK, including to housing benefit, council tax benefit, child benefits and tax credits (Taylor-Gooby and Stoker 2011, Beatty and Fothergill 2013). April 2013 saw the introduction of a raft of these changes, including capping levels of income assistance which can be claimed through housing benefit and a reduction in the annual up-rating of most working-age benefits. The data collected indicate that several of these reforms are especially important: the abolition of the social fund; the introduction of the 'bedroom tax' and changes to council tax benefit; increased length of sanctions; changes to the criteria for Employment Support Allowance (ESA); and caps to entitlement and uprating levels (see Simmons 2013, Beatty and Fothergill 2013, National Housing Federation No Date, DWP 2013 and CUF 2013).

The findings showed that both changes to the levels of social security entitlements and problematic welfare processes are impacting on needs (see also Lambie-Mumford 2014c). Reduced entitlement and increased conditionality (particularly policies relating to ESA, housing benefit and the cap on uprating) were seen by providers to be driving up need for foodbank provision. The restructuring and reduction in state-provided crisis support was also seen to be a key driver of need for emergency help with food. The abolition of the discretionary social fund and its replacement with short-term benefit advances and local welfare assistance (managed by local authorities) had caused confusion over what local people were entitled to and how they could access it; and the evolving nature of relationships between foodbanks and the providers of local welfare assistance indicated the potential for routine referral to foodbanks over the phone when people were found not to be eligible for state-provided crisis support. Extensions to length of sanctions were also identified as a driver of foodbank need; and one which could be particularly significant in the context of restructured and insecure crisis provision. Social security processes in the administration of welfare payments were found to be problematic also, where they were leaving people without an income. This included inappropriate sanctioning decisions, errors made in declaring people on Employment Support Allowance fit for work and more generally, ineffective administration of welfare payments where people's payments are delayed or stopped and they are left with no or heavily reduced income.

There appears therefore to be a relationship not just between social security reform and food bank need, but also between social security administration and food bank need. This indicates a need for clarity around the impact of current welfare reform (in terms of policies changing social security), on the one hand, and the impact of social security processes (how it is administered), on the other.

Within the context of this growing demand for and provision of food banks, it is interesting to see how both individual foodbank projects and the Trussell Trust network as a whole have been responding and adapting. Since 2011 they have become

more established and have been facing increasing demand. This has resulted in changing ways of working locally and the emergence of identifiable local 'systems' of food charities – as was documented in case studies of Sheffield and Bristol. It has also resulted in changes in ways of working nationally for the Trussell Trust Foodbank Network, including an on-going professionalisation and changes to processes and procedures, on the one hand, and a parallel reimagining of the nature and conceptualisation of the localised aspects of individual projects. Food banks therefore appear to be responding and adapting to growing demand in particular ways at various geographical levels: by working closer together at a local level; and nationally, streamlining procedures and rethinking scales of food storage and its provision to accommodate the future trajectory of need.

The development of these charities into highly professionalised, streamlined organisations could also be seen as a result of welfare diversification (see Lambie-Mumford 2013). An agenda initially pursued by New Labour governments (1997-2010) as part of the so-called 'Third Way' and now wrapped up in the Conservative-led coalition government as part of the 'Big Society' agenda, this diversification involved the increasing involvement of the third sector in welfare provision and a resulting professionalisation of the (third) sector as it has to compete in the system (Alcock 2010).

The findings presented above highlight the symbiotic relationship between the withdrawal and retrenchment of the welfare state and the growth in the provision of and need for foodbanks. The consequence of this simultaneous retrenchment of the welfare state and foodbanks filling the gaps left behind risk these projects, however unintentionally, becoming part of the welfare state and actually enabling its further withdrawal. There could be two eventualities to this end. One possibility is that foodbanks could become increasingly embedded parts of welfare systems broadly defined where the state maintains responsibility for alleviating poverty (through, for example, a continuation of local welfare assistance schemes). Alternatively, with an end to funding for local assistance schemes, reductions in social security entitlements and failures to rectify inadequate processes, foodbanks could remain distinct non-government funded initiatives, but ones which do their work in local communities in the absence of state responsibility for poverty alleviation. There could also be a third, slightly more subtle, eventuality. By means of the voucher referral system, this could see foodbanks not necessarily becoming a distinct part of the system but effectively becoming enrolled within its delivery, providing, as they do, a 'tool' for statutory services to call on as part of their work when tackling chronic need.

In sum, we appear to have reached an important moment in food banking in the UK. Whilst, currently, food banks appear to be doing their best to resist incorporation into social security processes, the relationship between locally run welfare and local food banks is particularly concerning. If these systems routinely refer people to food banks instead of providing financial support themselves, it is hard to see where the line can be drawn. Moreover, if funding is withdrawn altogether from this support, as has been reported (LGA 2014), then that opens up an urgent question of what role that leaves food banks playing in local communities. At a national level, food bank demand appears to be signalling the inadequacy of both social se-

curity provision and the processes through which it is delivered. Similarly, if these issues are not addressed, the point at which foodbanks become an extension (if not a formal part) of a failing welfare state might not be far away. It is currently a dynamic time for social protection in the UK. There is on-going change and discussion driven by ideology and questions of who should be providing which kinds of services, who is best equipped to do so and what the best kind of support looks like. Overall, what is emerging is a leaner welfare state and this retrenchment is impacting on both the need for and shape of food banks.

Whilst the rise of foodbanks could well be said to represent the increasing responsibility held by civil society-based social protection, the right to food approach stipulates that the state is the duty-bearer. Furthermore, the right to food insists that there is a need to ensure that everyone's right is fulfilled when they cannot provide food for themselves. This means that any shift from entitlement to charity (which is not a right and accessible to all) is a particularly problematic aspect of the contemporary shift in food-based social protection. Having said this, a right to food approach does not necessarily just refer to social protection provided exclusively by the state, as duty-bearer, in the form of welfare provision. It could involve other interventions by the state, for example in the food market or labour market to ensure financial security or fairer access to affordable food. It could also mean that civil society organisations are involved in social protection in some way, so long as this was entitlement-based. Ultimately, the state has responsibility to ensure that the right to food is fulfilled adequately but what this fulfilment looks like, in practice, is open for discussion.

#### 4. Where Next?

The findings of this research highlight the problematic nature of charitable emergency food provision from a right to food perspective. These systems are ultimately not adequate or sustainable by right to food standards which emphasise the importance of the social acceptability of food acquisition, on the one hand, and the sustainability of food access into the future, on the other. Emergency food provision forms an identifiably and experientially 'other' system to the socially accepted mode of food acquisition in the UK today – the commercial food market through shopping. Providers are not necessarily able to make food available through these systems, with their ability to do so shaped in important ways by the structure of the food industry in which they operate; and people do not always have the ability to access emergency food projects and the food available from them whenever they may feel they need it. The findings reported in the second empirical part of the paper indicate that the state is, if anything, retreating from its duty to respect, protect and fulfil the human right to food and emergency food provision is assuming the responsibility to fulfil this right, where it can and in its own way.

##### *Why food rights?*

There are two key reasons why the right to food helps to frame the practical conclusions which can be drawn from this research. Firstly, it is well suited to current policy-making contexts which incorporate multiple actors and interests and,



secondly, it helps us to think about and understand the role of a whole range of stakeholders.

The appropriateness of the right to food approach for the contemporary context lies in its affinity with both the processes involved in policy making and the capacity of the state to respond and drive a comprehensive response in the UK today. Policy network analysis highlights the ways in which policy making is not conducted through formal institutions but instead through informal networks which involve complex interplay between ministers, civil servants, pressure and interest groups and many others in the process of arriving at particular policies (see Richards and Smith 2002 and Hudson *et al.* 2007). The right to food approach fits well within this networked reality and is particularly 'actionable' within it. It is inclusive of the wide variety of actors and groups that have a stake in the agenda and takes account of the complex roles played by each and every one of them. The right to food as a social ethic – a parent of policies in pursuit of this social good – may therefore be particularly helpful in so far as it provides a loose framework, giving everyone the space to enact their responsibilities and acknowledge the role of a wide variety of actors.

In addition to this affinity with the policy process there is a further factor which the right to food approach may help with in moving towards progressive ways forward: namely, that in practice the state has – for reasons of necessity or ideology – little capacity (or political will) to respond comprehensively by itself to the problem of food poverty. Politically and practically, we are having to face up to the emergence of a much leaner welfare state and an ever-increasing reluctance to interfere with any kind of market. This more networked approach fits this reality in its focus on other actors taking responsibilities alongside the state. The notion of the state as the duty-bearer within this context, then, is particularly helpful. It places accountability with the state, but recognises the role for other stakeholders in actions towards progressive realisation of the right to food.

The utility of a right to food approach also lies in the way that it helps us to build a better picture of these different roles, to make space and account for the responsibilities of other actors which need to be played out in these frameworks. General Comment 12 of the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) stresses that 'individuals, families, local communities, non-governmental organisations, civil society organisations, as well as the private business sector' all have responsibilities in the realisation of the right to food (CESCR 1999). Employing this approach to thinking about solutions to food poverty therefore provides us with an opportunity to point to what these roles and responsibilities are in practice now and ask in theory what they should be in the future (see Lambie-Mumford 2014 for a full outline).

On the basis of the findings which are presented and the theoretical developments which are explored throughout the paper, it is possible to argue that we need to conceptualise the problems (in the shape of the need for emergency food) and the solutions to that need in terms of rights, solidarity and care. The human right to food provides an important framework for focussing on solutions which see food as a social good; and sees access to food as a social aim and ethic which states, alongside other actors and their citizens, can work together to achieve in a pro-

gressive way. There could well be a role for food charities within this – but a social and political role, rather than a food-based role. Given the problematic nature of charitable food provision from this rights perspective – it is not a protected entitlement; providers are not easily held accountable; and it is not an accepted means of food acquisition – their role as hunger relief is not a progressive one. Nevertheless, as social movements and as part of political networks, these national organisations have the potential to play significant roles in the future realisation of the human right to food in the UK and beyond.

### *Recommendations*

To end this paper some recommendations are offered, on the basis of the research findings and conclusions presented. They are suggested for a range of stakeholders, including emergency food providers, policy makers, NGOs, the food industry, local communities and individuals and researchers.

**Emergency food charities** should emphasise and focus on their social and political contribution to effecting progressive responses to food poverty and realising the human right to food in the UK. Specifically, they should focus on:

- Their signposting work and connecting poverty services locally.
- Their advocacy and campaigning work at local, devolved and national levels.
- Their awareness of the symbiotic relationship between emergency food provision and the welfare state and the need to do all they can not to become a permanent substitute for the (welfare) state.

**Policy makers nationally** should focus on the issue of rising use of emergency food provision and the problem of food poverty. Right to food strategies should be adopted for guiding tangible policy responses which also draw on other actors and hold them to account. Given the lack of data and understanding of the problem of food poverty and given how problematic these systems are as 'stand-alone' responses, first steps towards this should seek to:

- Establish and fund a regular systematic measure of food poverty in the UK.
- Begin a consultation on a right to food strategy, bringing in all Whitehall departments and the full range of stakeholders across civil society, government and the private sector.

**NGOs** should engage more with rights-based discourses to guide campaigning and advocacy. They should also focus on holding government to account over the rise of food poverty and the country's increasing reliance on emergency food provision. Particular recommendations for NGOs would be:

- To lobby for a UK right to food strategy.
- To support emergency food providers by giving voice to the evidence they collect around levels and drivers of need.
- To hold the food industry to account, as well as the government.

**The food industry** should engage with the issue of food poverty beyond support-



ing food charity as part of corporate social responsibility. The industry – specifically retailers – should look at fairness across their food chains and specifically:

- Look at how the structure of their retailing (planning and location of stores), pricing and offers impact on food poverty in the UK.
- Look at their role as employers in determining employees' experiences of food poverty in relation to zero-hour contracts and living wages particularly.

**Local communities and individuals** should, in addition to their engagement in the work of helping others in their social networks or getting involved in an emergency food project, join wider discussions at local authority, devolved and national policy levels around food poverty and the right to food.

**Researchers** should cut through the vast range of questions open for exploring in relation to the phenomenon of emergency food provision and engage more fully with the right to food framework and ask tougher questions about constructive ways forward.

## Acknowledgements

The research on which this paper was based can be read in full in Lambie-Mumford (2014). The project was funded by the Economic and Social Sciences Research Council (award number ES/J500215/1) and undertaken while the author was a member of the Department of Geography, University of Sheffield.

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