

Struggling for food in a time of crisis

Responsibility and paradox

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For a comment by Martin Caraher on this article, see pp 26-27 of this issue.

Fig. 1. Jan Olin from Patch Food and Basic Bank brings back 'surplus' food from a supermarket.

In her 2019 AT editorial on epidemics and anthropologists, Melissa Leach concluded that 'further infectious disease threats are an inevitable part of our world's future' (2019: 2). There were many such voices, yet the world ignored this threat, as we now know to our cost. In the UK, with the arrival of the Covid-19 virus on our shores earlier this year, the focus in the media has been largely (and understandably) on the health service and social care sector, whereas my focus here is on food, particularly food insecurity.¹

I use the concept of responsibility (taking my cue from the next ASA [Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK & Commonwealth] conference) as a lens to examine the current state of food poverty in the UK in the context of the Covid-19 crisis. Who is responsible for ensuring that the nation – and all of its citizens – are fed? The government? The food industry? Or the charity sector, including food banks? Who gains what from demonstrating responsibility and who should be blamed for failing to do so? The concept of responsibility is a contested one and contains a number of paradoxes which may be hidden or disguised by counter-narratives and policies, as will be shown.

Backstory

We cannot begin to make sense of the current crisis in food security in the UK without looking at the context in which the epidemic has arisen. The backstory is a decade of severe austerity and ever-growing inequality which has seen the inexorable rise of food poverty associated with low wages and precarious employment, as well as with cuts to and changes in social welfare, most notably in the system of Universal Credit (Human Rights Watch 2019; UN 2019). The Food Standards Agency (2019) estimates that around 20 per cent of UK adults are food insecure, some severely so, but the state has largely been in denial about the problem of food poverty.² Numerous publications by voluntary organizations, as well as a large amount of research by academics, have led to little change in government policy.

Unsurprisingly then, food aid organizations, especially food banks, have mushroomed during this period, many associated with churches (Caplan 2016; Caraher & Furey 2018; Garthwaite 2016; Lambie-Mumford 2017; Riches 2018). The largest provider is the Trussell Trust³ which has seen the number of its affiliated food banks grow exponentially to around 1,200, while there are also approximately 800 independent food banks (Loopstra et al. 2019).⁴

Such organizations are dependent on donations from the general public brought directly into the food bank or given in the baskets placed in supermarkets (which benefit from these extra purchases). In recent years, food banks have also entered 'partnerships' with food retailers, either bilaterally on a local basis or on a large scale through food redistribution organizations like FareShare⁵ (Caplan 2017). It is largely the existence of a so-called 'surplus' in the food chain which has created this supply to food aid organizations and at the same time, contributed to the 'brand' of the business concerned, as well as its CSR (corporate social responsibility) claims. During the five years of my research, food aid has become increasingly corporatized, following a pattern similar to that in North America (see Poppendieck 1998; Riches 2018), yet paradoxically, the food industry pays most of its workers very low wages, resulting in some of them having to go to food banks to make ends meet.



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To operate effectively, food banks require suitable premises and sufficient donations and volunteers. The latter collect donations from supermarkets, sort them, make up food parcels, run a café system during the opening hours of the food bank, offer a listening ear to clients, give advice or 'signage' about other helping organizations and perform numerous other tasks. Running a food bank is an extremely labour-intensive business (IFAN 2017).

However, it should be noted that not everyone who is food insecure goes to a food bank, as I found in my research in both north London and west Wales.⁶ Most often, the first recourse for help is the extended family or neighbours – although little is heard about this in the media – and the second is credit cards and lenders, resulting in high levels of debt. Many would be too embarrassed to go to a food bank, regarding it as an admission of failure, while those who do go, consider themselves – and may be considered by others – as stigmatized (Caplan 2016; van der Horst et al. 2014).

Furthermore, it must be pointed out that, even under the best conditions, the amount of help which clients receive from food banks is limited. Most of the food is ambient (packaged, canned) and clients have few choices. Under Trussell Trust rules, a client may only claim three food parcels, each containing food for three days, every six months, and this only with a voucher given by a professional or agency such as social services, Citizen's Advice or similar. Many independent food banks follow similar rules. In short, food banks do not usually provide sufficient food to feed individuals or families for any length of time.

1. The data for this article are drawn partly from existing literature, including the media, but also from my research between 2014 and 2019 on food poverty in the UK. The seven organizations with which I worked included four food banks, three of them affiliated to the Trussell Trust, and one independent (Caplan 2020, in press) and were situated in north London and west Wales.

2. Only in 2019, and after a long campaign, did the Department for Work and Pensions start to measure food poverty as part of its annual Family Resources Survey. However, the first set of results did not come out until April 2021 (see <https://www.emma-lewell-buck.net/emmas-food-insecurity-bill-is-happening/>).

3. www.trusselltrust.org.

4. In addition to other forms of food aid, such as soup kitchens and lunch clubs, numerous other helping organizations keep (usually smaller) stocks of food to give out to clients when needed.

5. <https://fareshare.org.uk>.

6. Power (2019) makes the same point for York.

7. These have been considerably delayed. See Weale & Murray (2020).

8. As a child, I was sometimes sent with a covered dish to bring home such food from our local British restaurant.

9. As many farmers had predicted, this was not very successful and in mid-April, Romanian migrant workers were being flown in to start work (O'Carroll 2020).

Fig. 2. Colour coding for dates.
Fig. 3. Food box in a food bank.
Fig. 4. Notice on front door of a Trussell Trust food bank.
 FareShare food does not need a voucher.
Fig. 5. World War II ration book.

ASA 2020. Responsibility. ASA conference. <https://www.theasa.org/conferences/asa2020/theme>.

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Human Rights Watch 2019. Nothing left in the cupboards: Austerity, welfare cuts, and the right to food in the UK. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/05/20/nothing-left-cupboards/austerity-welfare-cuts-and-right-food-uk>.

IFAN 2017. Food bank volunteer hours research. <https://www.foodaidnetwork.org.uk/food-bank-volunteer-hours>.

Lambie-Mumford, H. 2017. *Hungry Britain: The rise of food charity*. Bristol: Policy Press.

Lang, T. 2020. *Our food problems and how to fix them*. London: Pelican.

This then is the first paradox: namely, that the existence of food banks conveys the message that ‘something is being done’, but reveals that this is far from sufficient to meet the need.

The Covid-19 crisis

On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization declared that the spread of Covid-19 constituted a pandemic. A few days later, the chief executive officer of the Trussell Trust warned that the food aid sector might not be able to cope when the virus hit the UK and pleaded yet again that the minimum five-week waiting time for Universal Credit should be reduced (Revie 2020), which would help to reduce the demand on food banks.

In the same month, the Food Foundation (2020) reported that families were already borrowing to buy food and later that as many as one and a half million people were going whole days without food. By the end of March, almost one million had applied for Universal Credit and the numbers have risen further even as I write this article. Many of these constitute the new food poor and have swelled the ranks of those already in this category.

Given these circumstances, the government stepped in. On 17 March, the chancellor announced a package of measures to help citizens. These included loans for businesses, a ‘furlough’ period at 80 per cent of pay for employees whose place of work had been obliged to close down, food vouchers⁷ for families with children normally in receipt of free school meals and food parcels (See Butler et al. 2020)⁸ for those deemed ‘vulnerable’. Universal Credit was raised by £20 per week, but there was no change to the waiting period. On 23 March, the UK went into lockdown.

This constitutes the second paradox: that a government which had been responsible for inflicting austerity on the country for 10 years and dismantling large areas of the local and central state, reversed some of its policies and used its power as a state, undertaking to spend ‘whatever it takes’ to weather the crisis. This did not, however, have much effect on either already existing or ‘new’ food poverty (Lawrence 2020; Power et al. 2020).

The food industry became increasingly involved in the crisis. In March, the media was full of stories, first about ‘stockpiling’, then ‘hoarding’ and finally ‘panic buying’. Supermarkets, which had been experiencing unprecedented demand and making record profits of reportedly £1 billion, also had to accept some degree of responsibility. They first asked customers to be ‘considerate’ and moderate their purchases, but were eventually forced to introduce some forms of rationing. The food industry also donated either money or food to the food banks or to food distribution charities like FareShare to ‘feed the nation’. Even the hospitality sector made contributions, such as taking meals to National Health Service (NHS) workers (Partridge 2020). In a small town in west Wales, many of the restaurants and cafes donated their food to the local food bank when they were obliged to close (personal communication).

So did this mean that food banks could cope with the new as well as the ‘old’ food poor? There were a number of immediate difficulties.

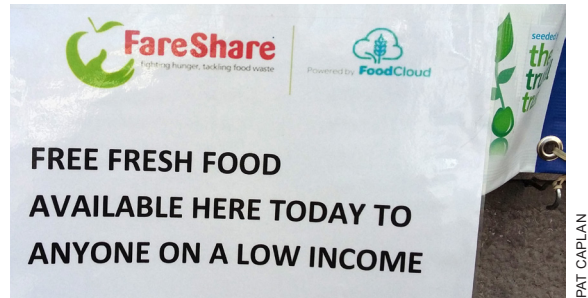
The first was adequacy of supplies. As early as 10 March, there were reports that some food banks were beginning to run out of food because donations had appeared to decrease as shoppers stocked up for themselves; further, given the empty shelves, there was much less surplus food for the supermarkets to donate. Even when they had money, the food banks could no longer buy in bulk. All of those food banks with which I had worked had experienced greater demand, and in some areas of the country, this rose by up to 300 per cent (Goodwin, in Lawrence 2020).



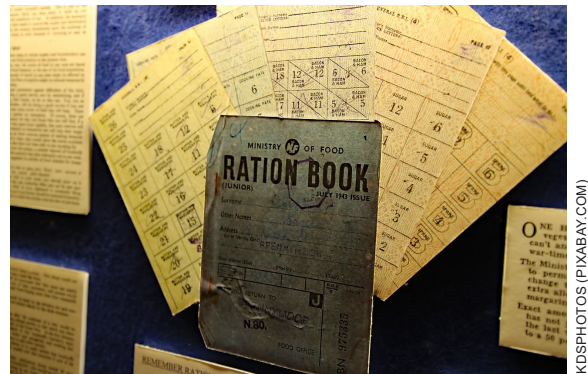
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The second problem was that although food bank volunteers were considered ‘key workers’ by the government, nonetheless ‘shielding’ had to be observed. There was an immediate drop in the number of volunteers available, as those over 70 years old or with underlying health conditions went into self-isolation. One food bank I had studied lost almost half of its volunteers overnight and this was not atypical according to press reports.

The third was the need to operate social distancing rules within a food bank. Some food banks switched to a delivery-only model, while others made up parcels which were collected by clients who entered and left buildings as quickly as possible. The former sociality of the food bank disappeared: no tea or coffee was available, no listening ear to problems, no advice (‘signposting’) unless via telephone, which only some food banks continued to give.

Most food banks, including all of the ones with which I had worked, were determined to stay open. However, even though some of their difficulties were gradually ironed out – more donations started to arrive, new volun-

Fig. 6. Interior of food bank in west Wales.



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Weale, S. & J. Murray 2020. UK's poorest families suffering as free school meal vouchers delayed. *The Guardian*, 9 April.

teers appeared – it has become clear that this sector cannot possibly deal with a crisis of this magnitude, which has shone a light on the fragility of the whole voluntary food aid system.

How could things be done differently?

Some writers on food poverty have argued powerfully for a rights-based approach, one which recognizes the entitlement of all citizens to adequate and nutritious food (e.g. Fisher 2017; Riches 2018; Riches & Silvasti 2014) and this has been supported by legal opinion (e.g. Van Bueren 2019). However, although this country has signed many of the relevant international covenants, these have not been incorporated into UK law and hence are not justiciable in the courts.

During the recent crisis, the Second World War has frequently been invoked rhetorically. Might it actually be helpful to look back at this period in terms of food policies and see if anything might be learned? The aim then was to ensure that everyone was adequately fed. The necessary policies were administered by the Ministry of Food and included a strict rationing system which continued for some years after the war had ended: sugar and sweets were rationed; bread, potatoes and vegetables were not. National kitchens ('British restaurants') were set up locally, where inexpensive meals were available.⁸

There were mass campaigns to persuade people to accept substitutes for meat and to grow more food themselves, especially vegetables and fruit ('dig for victory', allotments). Further, rationing affected everyone; hence, there was a considerable diminution in the grosser forms of inequality. Ironically, the nation was probably best fed during the Second World War, with no malnutrition or obesity, better child growth and fewer dental caries (Oddy & Miller 1985) than at any other time in its history. In his book on diet in England during the 19th and 20th centuries, John Burnett notes 'There is a curious irony in the fact that the two crucial periods in the improvement of the diet of the majority of English people coincided with times of national crisis – the Great Depression of the 1880s and the war-time and post-war difficulties of the 1940s' (Burnett [1966] 1982: 322). Another paradox?

Of course, any similar policies would require much greater state intervention than has recently been contem-

plated, but history shows that it is doable. Nonetheless, it is likely that the government, once some form of business-as-usual is re-established, will continue to back the charity sector. A determined attempt to ameliorate food poverty needs responsibility to be taken at both a national and local level: in the former regard, low wages and precarious employment as well as low levels of state welfare need to be tackled, while in terms of the latter, the LAs (local authorities) would need to have their decimated budgets restored so that they could rebuild their capacity to take on responsibility in this area (see also Parsons 2020).

Brexit and food security

There is another paradox – the elephant in the room – and that is Brexit and its likely effects on food security (Food Research Collaboration 2018-9; Lang 2020), particularly if, as seems increasingly likely, no 'deal' is achieved with the European Union. Given that much UK food is imported, mostly from Europe, it has been widely recognized that if the UK does not strike a deal, there will be considerable problems in importing food and prices are likely to rise. Furthermore, home-grown food, already insufficient, is running into problems: the lack of visas for the seasonal migrant labour force has led to attempts being made to set up a 'Land Army' of students and unemployed or furloughed workers to pick the fruit and vegetables grown in the UK.⁹ For these reasons among others, food insecurity appears likely to be with us for a long time, but it will of course be a much bigger problem for some than for others and likely to place further strain on the voluntary food aid sector.

For the past few years, Brexit has dominated national life and divided the nation, whereas the current crisis has appeared to unite the nation and bring out the best qualities in its citizens. Further, suddenly, the state is there to 'put an arm around you'. It has indeed taken some responsibility, and so too has the food industry to a certain extent. But the voluntary food aid sector, try as it may, cannot possibly assume responsibility for the long-standing and now hugely increased problems of both old and new food security. We need to look behind the rhetoric at the reality of the lives of the many poor people in this country, whose plight is nowhere more powerfully demonstrated than by their lack of ability to purchase the food they need. ●