

Food banks: the best kept secret of British social policy?

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Introduction

Food banks have existed for a long time in the UK but the work that they do and the populations they serve have fallen under the radar of mainstream academic and policy debates in British social policy. Some of the key reasons for this are that food banks have been mainly run by little known faith-based organisations and government policy in the 2000s has been hesitant to shed the spotlight on them. All this changed under the Coalition Government with the shocking claims that up to one million people have relied at one point or another on food packages from charities like The Trussell Trust.

The surge in media attention and the reluctant policy debate around food banks under the Coalition Government have highlighted the ever-closer realignment of the British welfare system to a two-tier system of employment-based social security and an officially sanctioned system of social safety nets populated in large part by charities – i.e the type of welfare system which exists in countries with weak or underdeveloped welfare states. This entry incorporates a desk review of available literature on food banks in the UK as well as published research conducted by the author among social welfare charities and voluntary organisations both in the UK and in the region of the Middle East and North Africa, with particular reference to organisations that have a faith-based or religious character.

Emergency food aid or food security?

Though not a new phenomenon in the UK, emergency food provision in the form of food banks has helped to standardise and formalise this provision on a national scale (Lambie-Mumford, 2013). The network of Food Banks led by The Trussell Trust has played a key role in this situation. In other parts of the English-speaking world charitable forms of welfare and social assistance

types of programmes are more the norm, such as in the USA and Canada where emergency food aid has a more established history. Equally, readers will be most familiar with emergency food aid to populations affected by civil conflict or environmental crises further afield in regions such as the Middle East or Africa. Here too the more common configuration for social welfare provision privileges the smaller proportion of formally employed workers (usually able-bodied men or public sector workers) and leaves the larger proportion of vulnerable members of the population or informal workers more dependent on forms of social assistance, including food aid. The evidence of the last decade in the UK shows that the UK, though at a different level of welfare development, is moving in the direction of this two tier system.

The use of emergency food aid and recourse to food banks has indeed increased in the UK in the last decade, but the evidence base on the role of food banks, the profile of their users or the reasons why individuals and families use them remains scant (Oxfam et al., 2015). Food banks in the UK provide food aid to people in need based on a system of referral by a health or social care professional, or other front-line agencies (Lambie-Mumford, 2013). Food banks are run by a variety of voluntary and often faith-based organisations who themselves acquire the food donations from consumers, retailers and the food industry. The largest network of food banks in the UK is the franchise run by The Trussell Trust charity (Lambie-Mumford, 2013). The main source of data regarding food bank usage in the UK is The Trussell Trust Network since such data is not officially collected by the government. Food banks are only one example of a variety of community level food aid projects which have proliferated in the UK in the last decade (Dowler and Caraher, 2003).

A small number of reports discussing general trends were produced by Oxfam/Church Action on Poverty, namely *Walking the Breadline* (2013) and *Below the Breadline* (2014). These argued that the rise in food aid in the UK is not associated strictly with the growth of The Trussell Trust Network but that the number of meals provided by three of the main food aid providers (The Trussell Trust, Fareshare and Food Cycle) increased by over 50% between 2012/13 and 2013/14. A desk-review by the Department of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) argued that robust empirical evidence on UK food aid provision, and the reasons for its use, remained limited. The Department for Work and Pensions has also recently stated that there is 'no robust evidence' linking the effects of welfare reform policies to the rising use of food banks. But it is clearly not possible to separate discussion of food bank use in the UK from the current economic context which has become marked by higher food and fuel costs, stagnating or declining real wages and the continued effects of the economic recession.

In sum, food banks are an emergency resource which deals with the symptoms of poverty and not its causes. They are an expression of the good will of voluntary sector organisations who are able to step in at times of crisis to offer direct support to those in need. But their growth and formalisation in British society reflects not only the detrimental impact of economic recession but the tightening of social security laws which are pushing citizens out of the social protection umbrella of the state.

Key implications for social policy in the UK

The issue of food banks is deeply linked to broader debates about food security and human rights. Dowler and O'Connor (2012: 46) cite a recent UN rapporteur on food security as arguing that 'focusing on food experiences in the context of human rights, food poverty and food insecurity can be interpreted as symptoms of the failure of a system to ensure adequate income levels and the availability and affordability of healthy food. The dependence on food banks is 'symptomatic of a broken social protection system and

the failure of the State to meet its obligations to its people'.

These issues are also made clear in a recent joint report by Oxfam, Child Poverty Action Group and The Church of England (2015) on the perspectives of users of food banks in the UK whereby by evidence clearly suggests that difficulties vulnerable groups experience with the benefits system in the UK increase their dependence on food banks like The Trussell Trust. Factors such as having to wait for benefits, dealing with the impact of sanctions, experiencing delays with disability benefit or tax credits were cited as key reasons for seeking recourse in food banks. These factors occur against a backdrop of difficult living circumstances such as geographical isolation, physical and mental illness, caring responsibilities, difficulty obtaining educational qualifications or skills and financial indebtedness. Hence some of the key policy recommendations made in the Oxfam et al. (2015) report include: (1) Improving access to short-term benefit advances; (2) Reforming sanctions policy and practice; (3) Improving the Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) regime so that help can be maintained when claimants are challenging a decision; (4) Sustaining and improving access to emergency financial support; (5) Ensuring Jobcentres provide an efficient and more supportive service; (6) Improving access of benefit-users to appropriate advice and support.

Food banks are an emergency measure but a clear sign that state social protection in the UK is increasingly unable or unwilling to address the challenges posed by an uncertain economic climate and a tough welfare reform agenda.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it has been argued that food banks have a long history in British social policy but their role has become more prominent in the last decade. Though they are underpinned by the good will of a vibrant charitable sector, acknowledging their role formally in the current political and economic climate confirms the new welfare settlement within which poverty alleviation is to take place in the UK.

References

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