



Structural Inequalities and the Growing Need for Food Aid

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Introduction

Inequalities built into social structures and institutions, or structural inequalities, shape the way food is accessed and the lived experience of food poverty. COVID-19 has exposed and amplified inequalities of race, gender, and class in the UK, entrenching poverty and poor health among already disadvantaged groups (Women's Budget Group 2020, Marmot, Allen et al. 2020). This is illustrated by sharp rises in food bank use, documented by the Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN) (Goodwin 2020). Now, more than ever, it is important to critically explore how inequalities shape access to food in the UK, and to do so conscious of the systems, histories and institutions which create and maintain inequalities. In this context, IFAN and the University of York organised a panel discussion on how structural inequalities shape lived experiences of food and access to food aid, a first step in a broader and much needed critical debate.

The webinar sought to open a conversation and consider the questions: How does race and gender shape the lived experience of poverty and experiences around food? Does food aid exclude minority groups? How do government policies create and exacerbate inequalities of race, gender, and class in terms of the accessibility and affordability of food? What can be done to confront the structural inequalities linked to poverty and access to food?

Panellists included Suzanne Babb (Why Hunger), Dee Woods (IFAN and the Granville Community Kitchen), Kimberly McIntosh (Child Poverty Action Group), and Dave Beck (University of Salford). The discussion was chaired by Maddy Power, Co-Chair of IFAN's Board of Trustees and Wellcome Trust Fellow at the University of York. Presentations from each of the panellists were followed by a Q&A session involving 200 attendees. A recording of the webinar can be found [here](#).

This briefing paper sets out short reflections from each of the four panellists, followed by longer responses to key questions raised in the webinar, written by the panellists, as well as by Maddy Power and IFAN Coordinator, Sabine Goodwin.

Panellist Reflections

Dee Woods on how race and gender shape access to food in the UK

Social inequity and state violence underlie the food crisis in the fifth richest economy in the world. This food crisis impacts Black and Asian women disproportionately. Black and Asian women are violently othered through deeply entrenched systems of oppression: racism, patriarchy, ableism, classism. Black and Asian women look after others. They look after people in communities, at home, and in their jobs. They are carers; the ones who look after children and elders, and responsible for food in the home whether working in low paid jobs, often part time or zero-hour contracts, or on welfare benefits. Older Black and Asian women are increasingly on their own with little or no familial support. Black women in particular are often single parents. They are living in underserved areas in poor housing, overcrowded, with high rents.

These women are overworked, stressed, carry generational racialised trauma and are further traumatised from continual state and societal violence which manifests in what they eat and when they eat – if they are able to eat; it manifests in health inequalities and in death. During this pandemic the increasing numbers of Black women of all ages and from various backgrounds and situations seeking food aid is disturbing.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation report published in 2020 (Anderson 2020) reinforced that Black people are more likely to experience in-work poverty than white counterparts, with unaffordable childcare, falling benefit incomes and rising housing costs operating as key drivers of economic inequalities. Black and Asian women are also affected by the two-child limit on Child Benefit.

Alongside austerity, the UK has seen the development of a hostile environment since 2012 where policy and legislation designed to make it difficult for undocumented migrants to remain in the UK has had devastating impacts on asylum seekers and refugees, and diaspora communities from former colonies (Goodfellow 2020). Asylum seekers are denied their basic human rights to shelter, healthcare, work and food, and rely on charity to survive (Phillips 2020).

There are also food systems and planning inequalities that mean that access to affordable, nutritious, culturally acceptable foods are out of reach, having to travel to get these or settle for the non-nutritious, highly processed non-foods that proliferate in our communities (Shaw 2014).

These are all structural racisms.

Kimberly McIntosh on the shift from individualism to solidarity

The landscape that anti-poverty campaigners work within has changed. Research shows that there has been a shift in public attitudes away from individualism and towards care. Recent research by More in Common suggests that the COVID-19 crisis has prompted an outburst of social solidarity (Juan-Torres, Dixon et al. 2020). More than half (57%) of respondents in this research reported an increased awareness of the living conditions of others, whilst 77% feel that the pandemic has reminded us of our common humanity. Encouragingly, 62% feel they have the ability to change things around them – an increase of 15 points since February. This is coupled with increased public concern about poverty, at its highest ever level since 1999 (Ipsos MORI, 2020a). This is good news for those interested in justice.

That said, we should not overstate the potential this polling offers, nor how much polling in and of itself can tell us. The resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020 for example, is not universally supported. An Ipsos MORI poll showed that, whilst half of Britons (51%) support the aims of the Black Lives Matter movement, one in five oppose the movement. There are stark divisions between younger and older people, with 18-24 year olds much more likely to support the movement (Ipsos MORI, 2020b). As Dee Woods has made clear, austerity policies have had a disproportionate impact on Black and Asian women in particular since 2010 (Women's Budget Group, 2017). Health inequalities and poverty rates are stratified across ethnic lines and exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Marmot, Allen et al., 2020).

To capitalise on this shift towards solidarity and care, we need to make the case for solidarity across race and class boundaries, within our local communities and outside of them.

Dave Beck on how class shapes the lived experience of poverty and the dynamics of food aid

Working class communities have been negatively affected by the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic. However due to the introduction of neoliberal policies within the UK from the late-1970s, attitudes towards working class communities have become fractured, even by those who are members of the working class. The idea of neoliberal meritocracy and social mobility has created long-lasting damage within working class communities. However, some people struggle to become as meritocratic as their better positioned counterparts, for example, those who have stronger familial support networks.

What this has meant for the current pandemic is that we have forgotten to look after each other. Those with higher economic and social capital (as argued by Bourdieu (1986)) have better ability to hoard food and supplies as we neared the first national lockdown, fearing that they would run out of products. Those who had cars were able to circumnavigate supermarket restrictions placed on products, as they drove between supermarkets collecting toilet rolls, pasta and bread.

In sum, neoliberal attitudes have created a perfect storm of poverty and inequality within working class communities. Those able to wrap themselves in a blanket of hoarded food have been able to create themselves a safety-net of support, but they did this at the expense of their fellow citizens.

Suzanne Babb on learnings from the United States regarding what can be done to confront structural inequalities around gender, race, and class in access to food

Structural inequalities in the United States (US) are mainly a result of racist policies and practices that resulted in generations of poverty and food insecurity for people of colour. Policies in other areas, such as housing and education, also affect levels of poverty and food insecurity. We cannot talk about structural inequalities without addressing the initial historical insults (including land dispossession of Native Americans and enslavement of West Africans) in the US. It is important to name these historical insults because so many policies and practices that followed and currently exist are iterations or adaptations of these practices and the current beliefs and values around people of colour stem from here.

Structural inequalities have resulted in discrimination that has impacted people of colour's ability to generate and accumulate wealth. It has disproportionately impacted their poverty and food insecurity levels. Some of the major areas of structural inequalities include:

- Land dispossession
- Labour policies, low wage employers and income inequality
- Food apartheid in neighbourhoods
- Housing and education
- Narrative-pull yourself up by your bootstraps or the "Welfare Queen"

In 2019, 35.2 million people struggled with hunger (USDA 2020). Food insecurity rates are higher than the national average (about 10.5%) for some communities of colour: 19% of households headed by Black, non-Hispanic people experience hunger and 15.6% of households headed by Hispanic people experience hunger; compared to just 7.9% of White, non-Hispanic households. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these disparities. Of the 54 million people experiencing hunger during the pandemic, 20% of Black people and 19% of Latinx people report not having enough to eat compared to 7% of white people.

Solutions to hunger and poverty are multi-pronged, multi-faceted and can look different for each community. At the basis of these solutions is movement building that creates social change. Resources should be directed towards supporting these grassroots organisations. Outlined are strategies grassroots organisations have employed:

Building Collective Grassroots Power – Uniting communities and organisations around similar struggles and supporting each other's solutions (based in shared values, shared vision and a shared analysis and understanding of how disparities in poverty and food insecurity were created). Examples: National Black Food and Justice Alliance, HEAL Alliance, Closing the Hunger Gap.

Alternative Economies – Building infrastructure, institutions and economies based on the vision of the world we want. These economies are based in more collective values than our current dominant economic system. Examples: US Federation of Workers Cooperatives, Cooperation Jackson.

Leadership Development – This leadership development is based in building organising skills versus the non-profit model of leadership development. Developing the practical and technical skills to create many leaders in the movement. To acquire the skills to organise and create the communities people envision. Examples: Food Chain Workers Alliance, Soul Fire Farm.

Policy Development – Creating policies that are based in values that support people and the planet. This also requires ensuring policies are properly carried out and enforced. Examples: Maine Food Sovereignty Act, Michigan Good Food Charter.

Narrative Change – Forces us to examine the following statements and questions: How you frame the problem is how you frame the solution. What are the dominant stories around hunger and food insecurity and how do they help to perpetuate it? Who do they blame? Who are cast as the heroes and villains? Who are the storytellers? How do you dismantle those dominant stories? How do we tell the true story? How do you uplift the true solutions? How do you create greater meaning for the true story versus the dominant story?

Responses to key questions

Questions raised by audience members at the webinar followed the following broad themes: government and policy on food poverty; root causes of food poverty; the role of non-governmental actors in food aid; issues surrounding choice and sustainability; comparative international perspective (USA); and communicating food poverty. The responses below by the panellists, alongside Maddy Power and IFAN's Coordinator Sabine Goodwin, are grouped by these themes. Responses are marked by panellist initials: Dave Beck (DB), Dee Woods (DW), Kimberly McIntosh (KM), Suzanne Babb (SB), as well as Maddy Power (MP) and Sabine Goodwin (SG).

GOVERNMENT AND POLICY ON FOOD POVERTY

Q. Are there any plans to appoint a Minister for Hunger?

There are currently no plans for the Government to appoint a Minister for Hunger, despite the demands of many charities, including IFAN. Although IFAN would welcome a cross-departmental approach to reducing to the drivers of food poverty, we would not welcome the separation of 'hunger' from a focus on poverty. The responsibility for poverty (which is the main driver of hunger) needs to lie with the Department of Work & Pensions, the Treasury, and the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government. This can best address the inadequacy of social security, low wage and insecure employment, and the (poor) availability of adequate local authority welfare assistance schemes. (SG/MP)

ROOT CAUSES OF FOOD POVERTY

Q. Where can the root causes of the structural inequalities behind food insecurity be traced back to?

The root causes stem from the power structures that seek to exploit people and extract resources for profit. Those structures have appeared in the form of colonialism and capitalism, and they have used racism, sexism and classism to maintain that power. These structures result in the inequities we see today: low wages, unaffordable housing, racial inequity, unemployment, inadequate government support and hunger. (SB)

Q. What is the largest contributing factor to food poverty in the UK? What role do things like 'fuel poverty' and 'time poverty' have on food poverty?

The largest contributing factor to food poverty in the UK is poverty. Food poverty – or hunger – is a symptom of poverty, not separate from it. The disaggregation of poverty into separate components – food poverty, fuel poverty, period poverty etc. – dissimulates the unifying factor behind all these different 'types' of poverty: inadequate income to cover living costs. This disaggregation enables 'emergency' charitable provision, for instance of food, to become an acceptable and logical response to poverty and, by doing so, undermines critique and action needed to address the systemic factors that cause poverty and hunger. (SG/MP)

Q. How has COVID-19 affected food poverty?

COVID-19 has severely exacerbated poverty and unemployment and led to sharp rises in the need for 'emergency' food aid (Power, Doherty et al. 2020). It has increased living costs and hardship for people living in poverty before the pandemic, and it has led to new hardship for many people who have become unemployed or seen a fall in income as a result of the pandemic. In addition, COVID-19 has created a new subset of the population vulnerable to 'food insecurity' because of demography, for instance age, or health status, rather than income. Members of this 'vulnerable' population may be required to 'shield', limiting their access to food and rendering them reliant on government or charitable assistance. IFAN has documented these changes in two reports: IFAN's data collation on emergency food bank distribution since COVID-19 (Goodwin 2020); and IFAN's joint report with Feeding Britain on hunger and the need for food banks between March and September 2020 (Goodwin and Forsey 2020). (SG/MP)

THE ROLE OF NON-GOVERNMENT ACTORS IN FOOD AID

Q. Should large food corporations have a part in campaigning against food insecurity?

Potentially this is a hypocritical situation, as most large food corporations hold some responsibility for exacerbating food poverty. As we know, people experiencing food poverty are doing so because they are trapped within a capitalist system in which they are at a significant disadvantage. Capitalism and some form of liberalism go hand in hand. Now we have neoliberalism, which is known to significantly exacerbate the poverty of people right at the bottom of the economic spectrum, as they are dogged by degrading insults associated with a lack of financial meritocracy.

I therefore, find it hypocritical to see large food retail organisations campaigning for reducing food poverty when they are also known to pay poverty wages and use zero-hour contracts, the same situation which causes rising precarity within working class communities. And the very same situation which traps working class people in the unending cycle of hunger and poverty. (DB)

Q. What is the role of schools in dealing with pupils experiencing food poverty?

This may be slightly difficult to address, as schools have clear safeguarding principles to uphold and no teacher would like to see a child suffer. This safeguarding also includes safeguarding children against hunger. However, I also recognise that safeguarding children against hunger is not the responsibility of schools; it is the responsibility of the government to offer a level of protection to ensure the health of the most vulnerable within society. There is evidence showing that several schools have organised and set-up their own food banks to enable children of low-income families to be able to source food. This was also the case during term time and out of term. This is an unacceptable situation. Within this position we need to consider the social exclusionary factors which may follow should a child in a school be known to using the food bank set-up within that same school. We know that poverty is a shameful experience, however, can you imagine how that is now experienced by a child attending the school food bank? I do not think it is the role of schools to be providing food banks, as it is the government's responsibility to ensure people have enough to be

secure in their own income. This is just a further ‘can-kicking’ exercise conducted by a neoliberal government which is going to exacerbate health and social inequalities for low-income families. (DB)

Q. What is the role of religious and spiritual institutions in food aid?

Religious institutions have historically played an important role in responding to hunger and have been a key feature of food aid in the last decade. The Trussell Trust food bank network is motivated by Christian principles of food charity and many of its food banks are run by individuals who identify as Christian. The Church of England estimates that 8,000 churches (60%) support food banks in some way; either by running them directly, providing volunteers or donations, or working in partnership with other organisations to host and assist them (Church of England 2019). Other faith groups also work to tackle hunger in the UK, including Islamic organisations such as Sufra food bank in London, and Sikh groups, including The Sikh Food Bank in Glasgow. Faith-based organisations and groups play an important role in responding to hunger today, however there is some controversy about the extent to which faith-based food banks are inclusive of all ethnic and ethno-religious groups. (SG/MP)

Q. Are there practical measures communities can take themselves to address food inequality in a sustainable way?

Communities can work together to increase access to affordable, nutritious, culturally acceptable and sustainable food by setting up market stalls, forming cooperatives or buying clubs to buy food at wholesale prices. Or they can buy shares in veg box schemes or cow shares in meat schemes working directly with farmers to reduce waste, and overhead costs. See [Granville Community Kitchen Good Food Box](#). (DW)

ISSUES SURROUNDING CHOICE AND SUSTAINABILITY

Q. How can lack of choice be addressed in food aid sector in terms of: 1) Lack of culturally appropriate food, and 2) Individuals with additional needs?

Organisations can fundraise to buy in these foods, or work with charity partners and other food providers, supermarkets, manufacturers to source of culturally appropriate foods. (DW)

Q. How can lack of choice be addressed in food aid sector in terms of the focus on distributing food surplus?

The use of food surplus in the food aid and community food retail sectors limits choice and the dignity that comes with it. Moreover, the acceptance and perpetuation of the notion that the solution to our food waste problem is to channel food surplus into the food aid sector not only exacerbates an inequitable two-tier system of ‘left over food for left behind people’ but is unsustainable in the long-term as the need for support continues to grow. (SG/MP)

Q. Can sustainable and local food models be accessible when: 1) Cheap food is damaging to environment, and 2) Eating local British food might not be culturally appropriate?

Sustainable and localised food models that are based on equitable trade, direct farmer to eater and cooperative models can offer affordable and culturally acceptable food. Hyper-local models can offer a wider selection of foods by increasing the diversity of crops that can be produced here. This will be more sustainable with communities working with farmers. (DW)

Food can be a reminder of home, family, joy, hope, loss and tradition; a legacy to pass on when other ties have been broken by borders. It is important to be culturally sensitive when we consider local, community-based policy interventions. Meaningful consultation and engagement with ethnic minority communities living in the area before the design stage is vital. Then an assessment of what is achievable to source locally and what will inevitably have to remain outside of the model can be established and managed. (KM)

The question is how accessible and sustainable can a local food model truly be if they are not culturally appropriate? Culture is composed of traditions, rituals, languages and other elements like food that have supported the spiritual and physical well-being of a community. This includes nutritional value. These foods have been cultivated and used for centuries in a culture. Not only is it important in terms of nutritional value, it is also important in terms of valuing peoples and their ancestral knowledge and practices. If a local food model does not include culturally appropriate food, it also raises the question around who is and is not in the decision-making position to determine what foods are included for neighbourhoods and communities. Omitting culturally appropriate foods subliminally contributes to a narrative that a White Ethnocentric version of a healthy diet is the only healthy diet that exist. Including culturally appropriate foods tells a fuller narrative around what healthy diets look like. It also gives the opportunity for farmers of different cultures to participate in local food models because they are the ones who are more likely to be growing culturally appropriate food for their communities thereby building in another level of equity and inclusiveness in a local food model. (SB)

COMPARATIVE INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE: UNITED STATES

Q. Could a direct link between charitable food aid and agricultural surplus like that in the US, improve the quality of food banking in UK?

The link between charitable food aid and agricultural surplus has not helped in the US so it is doubtful it will help in the UK. The agricultural surplus that poor communities are receiving are not fruits, vegetables or other healthy foods. The agricultural surplus in the US are mainly commodity crops like corn and soy which are then turned into additives and preservatives like high fructose corn syrup. These are then used in the creation of cheap processed foods that are disproportionately distributed in low-income neighbourhoods and communities of colour. Food banks take this food because it is donated by corporations or distributed by the government, and it is often distributed in huge quantities to feed many people. The corporations who donate this food are often funders and board members of food banks and have a lot of influence in how food banks operate. These

corporations are also often the low wage employers who do not pay their workers an adequate wage to live off of hence why many of their employees have to go use food banks. (SB)

COMMUNICATING FOOD POVERTY

Q. How can the link between hunger and obesity be communicated?

This speaks to why people are using both the terms hunger and food insecurity in the same conversation, at least in the US. What we are talking about is both the lack of food and calories (hunger), but also the lack of healthy food on a consistent basis in order to maintain a healthy lifestyle (food insecurity). You may have access to food, but it is not food that is healthy or nutrient dense. Oftentimes low-income communities and communities of colour live in neighbourhoods where there is an abundance of cheap, processed unhealthy food and a lack of access to healthy food. This imbalance in access contributes to poor health outcomes like obesity, diabetes and high blood pressure. Not having enough to eat in calories and not having enough healthy food are both issues of malnutrition and illustrate a fuller picture of hunger. (SB)

Q. Why is food poverty still a 'hidden crisis' in the UK?

Food poverty, like all forms of poverty, inequality and vulnerability, is hidden from view for a number of reasons. By the end of the 1970s economic polarisation was following an earlier rise in political segregation (Dorling 2014). This led to rising social polarisation, seen most clearly in rising spatial segregation between social and owner-occupier tenures within the British housing market during the 1980s. Economic and geographical inequalities reduce social mixing in schools and workplaces and are stratified across racial lines (Runymede Trust 2018). When we think of the phrase 'parallel lives', it conjures images of racial segregation but not the numerous other stratifications in Britain and the political decision-making that drives them. Schools and workplaces are key sites where we spend time with people that are not chosen by us. Growing social inequality reduces those interactions. As the rich become more and more segregated from the poor in Britain, rising poverty affects their daily lives less and less. Further, some elements of food poverty such as children who lack free school meals during the holidays or parents on low incomes going without food so that their children can eat and bills can be paid, may only be known to the families affected due to fear of stigma.

However, the austerity measures taken by the government from 2010 onwards made poverty more acute both materially but also visually. The growth of food banks and the increase in demand for their services was a very visual indication that people were struggling to pay for essential items. The Trussell Trust handed out around 41,000 food packs in 2009/10 compared to 1.2 million in 2016/17 (Trussell Trust 2017). Further, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought attention to the inequalities that blight British families. Work does not pay enough to live on, the social security system does not make up the shortfall and the two-child limit and benefit cap make life harder for families on low incomes. Encouragingly, the work of footballer and campaigner Marcus Rashford, has taken child poverty out of the shadows and into the mainstream. (KM)

Q. How can food banking be ‘de-normalised’?

Marcus Rashford has brought attention to the injustice of child poverty and access to food by centring the experiences of families, challenging narratives of shame and stigma and always shifting the focus back to the needs of children. The challenge now will be to keep the pressure on the government. The generosity of Rashford and the businesses, local authorities and public supporters is warming and welcome. But we must make sure that this response is not normalised or institutionalised. This requires a two-pronged approach. Organisations should support people who need their support. But they also need to be united in their message that it is the role of government to ensure demand for food banks ceases through policy interventions. Rashford has started to make this argument in his food poverty campaign, using phrases such as ‘this isn’t a long-term solution’ and ‘this is just the beginning’. Campaigners and policy teams should follow suit, ensuring that they articulate the drivers of use and emphasising that food banks are a short-term solution to a structural problem. (KM)

Food banking can be de-normalised through systemic change that is demanded by the people who are most impacted by hunger. Food banks and food drives are seen by many as the solution to hunger so a big part of the work to de-normalise that is changing the dominant narrative in the public’s eye around food banking as a solution. The alternative narrative work involves highlighting public policy that ensures the right to food. At the same time, it requires lifting up the stories and the work of grassroots community organisations who are addressing hunger and food poverty in ways that are not rooted in a charity model. Organisations that are creating solutions from the people most impacted and recognise the assets in these communities. Another important strategy would be prioritising the allocation of resources to grassroots organisations. Lastly, in order to uplift the grassroots solutions and to shift the resources to community solutions again requires a narrative change that values and sees communities, and not food banks, as experts. (SB)

Conclusion

COVID-19 has exposed and exacerbated inequalities that have long existed in our society. People from black minority and ethnic groups are more likely to die from Coronavirus than white people (ONS 2020) and more likely to experience a fall in income or employment as a result of the pandemic. Women are more likely than men to bear the brunt of the social and economic consequences of COVID-19 (Burki 2020), and those who were living in poverty before the pandemic have been particularly hard hit by rising costs associated with lockdowns and increasingly precarious employment (Power, Patrick et al. 2020). Made more starkly visible by this pandemic, these inequalities of class, gender and race, and the intersections between them, are rooted in long-standing histories of oppression and exploitation built into our social and economic structures. These structures are so fundamental to our society that they may appear part of everyday life. Yet, as Suzanne Babb writes, ‘we cannot talk about structural inequalities without addressing the initial historical insults.’ Colonialism, imperialism, slavery, gendered oppression, and the exploitation of labour are inherent to industrial capitalism. These histories are present in our lived experience of food, especially for those unable to access or afford it. A first step in ending the need for food aid is identifying and addressing these systemic inequalities which create and maintain hunger in contemporary society.

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