Introduction
Hunger, Food and Social Policy in Austerity

Elizabeth Dowler* and Hannah Lambie-Mumford**

Department of Sociology, University of Warwick
E-mail: e.dowler@warwick.ac.uk

**Sheffield Political Economy Research Institute (SPERI), University of Sheffield*
E-mail: h.lambie-mumford@sheffield.ac.uk

In many countries, people face cuts in jobs, wages and social security as economic austerity policies have been implemented to reduce public expenditure following the near collapse of the banking system in 2008. At the same time, rising food and fuel prices have combined to generate increasing and sometimes extreme hardship, not only in poorer countries of the global South where the impact has been severe, but also on economically vulnerable countries and populations in the global North. The re-emergence of 'hunger' as a widespread social reality and political concern in richer countries is a notable feature of the last few years, generating community responses and academic research even if, as yet, minimal policy response. For example, a recent special issue of the *British Food Journal* (Caraher and Cavicchi, 2014) on food banks included nine articles discussing the explosion in usage and acceptability of charitable food aid provision in rich countries. Riches and Silvasti's recent volume (2014), updating *First World Hunger: Food Security and Welfare Politics* (Riches, 1997) nearly two decades after its account of food and poverty in five rich economies, now provides evidence from twelve such countries, and there could have been more. What is perhaps even more remarkable is how slow public policy has been to react. Partly this is because the issues are cross-sectoral in the location of causal drivers and potential levers, and it is thus difficult to ascribe responsibility; partly it is because 'hunger' is not only difficult to define and document, it is also an intrinsically private issue: its experience and effects are personal, embodied and usually silent – except in extremes.

Furthermore, few places have data systems or appropriate institutions to enable 'food poverty' or 'hunger' (or, as discussed later in the articles, 'household food insecurity') to be systematically defined and monitored, with the differential circumstances and causes examined, so as to be able to identify causes and appropriate action. Rather, the most common policy and social commentaries are to use numbers seeking charitable help as indicators, and to locate the problem at the level of the individual, to see people as incapable of proper budget management or food selection and preparation, and thus leave the solutions for householders to find. The evidence from the publications above is that across Europe, Australia and North America, people are managing as best they can, but growing numbers are relying on local networks of food projects, many of which are systems of charitable food redistribution (either of food which would otherwise go to landfill, or which concerned fellow citizens buy and donate) through short-term emergency food parcels. Such solutions have consistently been shown in North America to be inadequate (Poppendieck, 1998, 2014; Riches and Tarasuk, 2014) because the

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amounts of food thus provided are too small and too piecemeal to meet systematic need, and the quality is variable and often poor; furthermore, sustaining the operation of such systems takes considerable effort, often by volunteers. More importantly, these solutions stigmatise recipients and depoliticise problems, enabling the state and society to ignore both responsibility and the possibility of a creative response.

The market answer is 'cheap food', that food prices should be brought down by all possible means, or that people should be enabled to buy food very cheaply through systems such as social supermarkets[1] or the Community Shop.[2] Lower food prices, of course, help those who have little money to assign to food expenditure, but in general prices are maintained low by keeping wages and job security low within the food system, often at the expense of both the healthiness of the food and its environmental and social sustainability (FEC, 2010, 2014). Social supermarkets (including the Community Shop) rely on food surpluses or waste within the system; they frequently offer rather limited ranges, often to a restricted membership, and are not a socially sustainable solution. There is considerable potential for corporate gain, and no upstream attention to the reasons – which are located in wage levels, social security structures and entitlements, and physical access to decent shops selling a range of affordable food for health – as to why people cannot afford to buy food in a regular fashion. For increasing numbers living under conditions of austerity, the essentials are no longer in place, and food expenditure has, of necessity, to be flexible: if people default on paying their rent or bills, serious troubles follow, whereas many can avoid starvation or severe hunger by managing on limited, reduced diets, which do not contribute to health, wellbeing or happiness.

Social policy has not been quick to engage with these problems or to offer a response; partly because 'food' is not often seen as a mainstream issue of relevance (although see Köhler *et al.*, 1997; Dowler and Leather, 2000; Dowler and Jones Finer, 2002; Deeming, 2011; Lambie-Mumford, 2013, among others), and partly because food aspects of poverty are essentially cross-sectoral responsibilities for which few coordinating mechanisms currently exist in rich countries. One very recent possible exception is emerging in Scotland, where a growing movement is bringing together policy makers, practitioners, local activists and those experiencing food poverty to address upstream issues.[3] This themed section is thus timely in bringing together evidence and experience from researchers from different European and a North American country to explore some of the challenges posed to social policy by contemporary experiences of hunger, food and poverty and food insecurity at the household level in rich countries. It draws together work originally presented at a panel at the annual Social Policy Association conference in Sheffield in 2013, and at an earlier workshop in Warwick in 2012,[4] both of which were convened to explore key challenges that experiences of household food insecurity or poverty, and charitable food assistance, pose for contemporary social policy. The articles include both reviews based on the authors' research and experiences, and findings from in-depth, mixed method surveys in different countries and settings, of people's experiences of living within increasingly constrained financial circumstances, and, in one instance, evaluation of a state food-welfare intervention.

A number of themes emerge across the articles. One is that even in Nordic countries (the articles by Nielsen *et al.* and Silvasti) with well-regarded systems of social welfare, or strong economies such as Germany (Pfeiffer *et al.*) and the UK (Dowler and Lambie-Mumford), there are growing numbers of households who struggle to eat in ways which have previously been seen as appropriate (for health) and acceptable (to society), and for

similar reasons: wages have not kept pace with the cost of living and/or inadequate social protection. Some households have experienced continuous reductions in resources over considerable periods while others faced sudden shocks, but all found their usual ways of 'coping' within difficult economic circumstances increasingly inadequate, leading to changes in the food purchased, how food is prepared and eaten, and with whom, and in expectations. For some, rising to the challenge and being able to adopt a 'simpler consumer life' were regarded as useful and appropriate experiences; for others, the changes were seen as evidence of growing hopelessness in the face of circumstances which they saw as unlikely to improve.

Secondly, there seems to be increasing acceptance by societies in general, and by policy makers in particular, that emerging systems which distribute free, charitable food are plausible and appropriate solutions to the problems of households being unable to afford to eat. Loopstra and Tarasuk, Silvasti, and Dowler and Lambie-Mumford, all document the growth and increasing institutionalisation of such systems in Canada, Finland and the UK, respectively; they provide trenchant critiques both of the effectiveness of such practices to address household food insecurity and meet people's needs, and of the social morality implied by the shift from entitlement to a gift relationship. They examine the retreat of the state from responsibilities which had not hitherto been questioned, and the emergence of non-governmental organisations or the mainstream Christian churches as institutions responsible for ensuring people have enough to eat. These shifts have implications for accountability and sustainability, as well as marking a devolution to largely voluntary labour. One might also note that in all three countries there is a pattern that those giving out free food also offer budgeting and other household management advice, which, while possibly useful to, and welcomed by, recipients, also implies that it is their lack which has led to the initial problems. By contrast, Lucas *et al.*, in their evaluation of the UK state welfare support targeted at low income mothers through *Healthy Start* vouchers, which are exchangeable for milk or fruit and vegetables, show a modest effectiveness in improving mothers' and children's diets, and that families valued the vouchers as a financial safety net which protected the food budget when other demands were significant. Mothers also mentioned various strategies to reduce any stigma in using vouchers rather than cash in purchasing food.

Thirdly, there is a consistent difficulty in both defining and then measuring food problems under austerity (these issues are picked up again in the review article). Different countries employ slightly different definitions and/or indicators, both in discussing the nature of what might be called 'food poverty' experiences, and the resonance with the formal understanding of household food insecurity, and in the criteria used by the state and (increasingly) the charitable sector to entitle individuals or households to financial or other forms of aid. Household level food security implies having economic and physical access to enough food which is socially and culturally acceptable and appropriate to meet dietary guidelines for health, and confidence the such access will continue. Consistent measurement of household level food security in Canada (as in the USA) over the last two decades enables Loopstra and Tarasuk to demonstrate the inadequacy of charitable systems of food aid ('food banks') to address the needs of households living in insecurity, both in terms of access coverage and in what food is actually supplied. The sufficiency or otherwise of income (from whatever sources) to enable purchase of enough food in acceptable ways is one element of 'food poverty' measurement; another, discussed at some length for Denmark and Germany (by Nielsen *et al.* and Pfeiffer *et al.*, respectively),

refs to the social and cultural acceptability of food practices which are taken for granted. Thus, there is recognition that people should be able to effect normative eating: not only in sufficient quantities and of the quality to meet government guidelines, but also being able to eat particular foods in ways which are seen as 'normal'; the implications are that how people obtain their food, and from where, are regarded as important too. Several respondents in the surveys discussed in these articles refer to the decreasing possibility of eating away from the home (in restaurants and cafes), or for offering and responding to hospitality; these privations are recognised (by respondents and the researchers) as not physiologically life threatening, but as socially and culturally damaging, and their experience within regimes of austerity is increasingly regretted (see also several earlier discussions in Köhler *et al.*, 1997, pre-austerity). Thus, the evidence of how people respond to tighter household budgets in relation to food behaviour illuminates practices across a range of income levels within the populations concerned; these are not just the experiences of the poorest in society.

Finally, hunger, 'food poverty', and household food insecurity are increasingly depoliticised through the actions of the voluntary sector, often church-led, in sustaining a charitable food response. This emerges from experience in Canada, Finland and increasingly the UK (Loopstra and Tarasuk, Silvasti, Dowler and Lambie-Mumford). Governments appear very reluctant to accept responsibility for the impact of low-waged economies and inadequate social security systems on people's ability to provide their households with sufficient, appropriate food. Instead, powerful alternative actors, working alongside trans-national food companies (whose interests are served through reduction in landfill food-waste taxes, exposure of consumers to donated brands and corporate social responsibility gain (see Caraher and Cavacchi, 2014; Silvasti and Riches, 2014)), appear to offer society 'win-win' solutions, which satisfies poor people's needs (preventing potential unrest) while providing important social roles to churches and other voluntary groups. The addition of budgeting and cooking skills to food distribution further cements the cause and problems as being at the household level of those experiencing distress, and distracts from the structural drivers of food insecurity, and even hunger, which are clearly occurring in some of the richest countries in contemporary society. We hope this themed section will help challenge the complacency and, some would argue, deep immorality in such practice, and encourage the further research which is sorely needed, as well as potent social and policy response.

Notes

1 Social supermarkets emerged across Europe in the late 1980s, and their general goals of supporting those with low incomes, preventing food wastage, and providing job opportunities for long-term unemployed people are endorsed by the European Commission as meeting several stakeholders' needs, http://socialsupermarkets.org/ [accessed 12.02.2015].

2 The Community Shop, http://www.community-shop.co.uk/, is a recent innovation of The Company Shop, http://www.companyshop.ltd.uk/company-shop.aspx [accessed 12.02.2015], a social supermarket operating in the UK. It enables people living in areas of multiple deprivation, and/or on specified social security benefit, to become members and thus gain shopping access to 'surplus' branded goods, particularly food, at very low prices.

3 See the Glasgow conference on 28.02.2015: http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/news_and_events/news/recent/seeds_sown_for_food_justice_movement_in_scotland [accessed 03.03.2015], and joint statement by the Leaders of Edinburgh and Glasgow City Councils: http://www.fhascot.org.uk/

Announcement/joint-statement-on-food-poverty-published-by-the-leaders-of-edinburgh-and-glasgow-city-councils [accessed 03.03.2015].

4 http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/research/priorities/foodsecurity/newsandevents/pastevents/householdfoodsecurity.

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