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Editorial

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Food Banks

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Title: Old crises on new plates or old plates for a new crises? Food banks and food insecurity

Martin Caraher
Alessio Cavicchi
Editors Special Edition on Food Banks

The BFJ has a long and distinguished history of reporting on all aspects of food including scares and food inequality (Mozley, 1994). The papers in this special edition deal with the issue of emergency food aid in countries of the global north, there are accounts from Italy, the Netherlands, the UK, Canada and Australia. We are used to seeing images in the media of food want and emergency aid in developing countries at times of climate crises or war (Franks, 2013). Historically to an extent, these have not been seen in the so called developed world since the 1930s, however the last 10 years has found them re-appearing with regularity.

Of course there has always been emergency food aid, in the past tribes and more latterly the church levied a tithe on food to help those less fortunate in the community. Food as a public good and its contribution to overall levels of community welfare is clear (Caraher and Carr-Hill, 2007). Classic welfare systems -in Europe and Canada- have been based on what Titmuss (1970) called the '*gift relationship*'. The French system of '*solidarité sociale*' for social insurance after the Second World War was conceived as a way of healing the ruptures caused by the war (Caraher and Carr-Hill, 2007). These approaches assume a 'common good' where even those who don't benefit directly see a social benefit from contributing, i.e. the alleviation of poverty is good for all. What is now different and needs to be questioned are the growth of outlets such as food banks/pantries to deliver emergency food aid to those suffering and how they impact on this community sense of '*solidarité sociale*'. The articles in this edition all show that food banks and the underpinning model of 'foodbanking' has grown in the last ten years. Food banks have always existed in some form or other what is now different is the scale and logistics of food aid being delivered through these outlets.

There are nine papers in this special edition which range from challenges to food banks dominating emergency food aid, those dealing with the logistics, effectiveness and efficiency of food sourcing and delivery and a paper highlighting the voice of the user. The paper by Booth and Whelan makes a case for challenging the growth of 'foodbanking' and contests '*the dominant intellectual paradigm that focuses on solving problems; rather it questions how problem representation may imply certain understandings*'. The 'understandings' here are about why foodbanking as a system has arisen and why we have not intellectually challenged this, this allowing the roll-back of the welfare state and the rise in philanthropy.

The second paper by Tarasuk and colleagues examines the Canadian perspective, with its longer tradition, thirty years, of food banks, this charts the growing dependency on charitable food provision and ultimately that food banks are an inadequate response to household food insecurity.

The third paper by Mumford and Dowler documents their research on UK food banks and the growth in the rising need as exemplified by the rising number of outlets for emergency food aid. They locate the debates within the lack of a co-ordinated policy response and the lack of a clear understanding of the '*causes of this need*'. The fourth paper, Wells and Caraher, sets out how the UK press have reported on food banks since the early 2000s. There has been a mushrooming of stories since the financial crisis in 2007/8 concomitant with changes in UK welfare provision. The fifth paper on the adaptations of the national Italian Food Bank by Santini and Cavicchi shows how at a country level the organisation has had to adapt to an increasing financial crises including receiving less support from the European Union.

The next three papers are a series of case studies concerned with how food can best be sourced, the planning logistics and the added value that food banks can offer through additional support and referral services. Paola, Melacini and **Perego** describe the logistics of the food supply chain for food banks in Italy. Lindberg and colleagues describe an Australian food rescue scheme, which they claim is different to a traditional food bank model. Butcher and her collaborators set out a food bank 'plus' model from West Australia which combines issues related to food aid with healthy

lifestyle initiatives.

Lest we forget, the study by Pascucci and colleagues from the Netherlands provides us with the voice of the user. And this final paper provides sobering reading reminding us of the indignity of poverty and how distribution channels of emergency food aid and the right to food are important (DeSchutter, 2013).

Many of the food bank developments described in the papers locate their origins in surplus food, that would otherwise become waste, from the manufacturing, retail and food service sectors, although this is increasingly being complimented by donations from the public. The content of these papers must be considered within the context that in the EU in 2013 there were 89 million tons of food waste across the 27 member states. The single largest contributor was household waste with 38 million tons, the manufacturing sector contributed 35 million tons and other food sectors contributed 16 million. Many companies now provide surplus or waste-food to food banks instead of sending it to landfill. This helps address some of their corporate social responsibility commitments and saves them money for not having to pay for disposal via landfill. This raises issues over what is culturally appropriate for those in food poverty to receive.

A key issue for emergency food aid organisations which become dependent on sourcing from surplus/waste is that there is little control over what is made available on a week to week basis. This makes it harder to plan a healthy food aid package for recipients. This issue is discussed in some of the papers in this special edition as well the tendency for reliance on processed and packaged foods which are easier to store. The two papers from Australia one on food rescue and the second on 'healthy food for all' provide some creative ways of addressing this issue.

The reasons for the increase in the numbers of food banks are a meeting of the dichotomies of caring concern and rising need. Rising need often heightened by the retreat of the state in the face of the global financial crises and caring concern in that people see their fellow citizens suffering. Winne (2009), a food activist in the US, says of food banks:

In the same vein we must seriously examine the role of food banking, which requires that we no longer praise its growth as a sign of our generosity and charity, but instead recognize it as a symbol of our society's failure to hold government accountable for hunger, food insecurity and poverty. (P 184)

The increase in demand, the changing category of those in need to include those who are working but on low-incomes. This latter group continues to grow as food prices increase while income remains at best stable and other budget demands such as fuel and housing place ever increasing demands on households and their resources.

The 'new hunger' is itself a complicated concept and gives rise to much political and popular media murmurings about the deserving poor and the undeserving poor (Seabrook, 2013; Berg, 2008). Engels in 1857 attempted to set a poverty standard based on total expenditure on food. Townsend in 1979 (p 264) said that '*Neither nutritional level nor percentage of total income committed to the purchase of food can be regarded as sufficient criterion of the satisfaction of forms of need*'. Nutritionally poor diets also equate with a lack of security and consistency around food intake. What people fail to realise is the changing nature of both poverty and food poverty. We are clearly not seeing food insecurity at the level of under-nutrition experienced by many countries of the global south. As many of the contributors to this special edition point out the global financial crises has increased food insecurity with soaring food prices. There is an irony here that OECD countries, such as the UK, Canada, Australia and the US poverty has increased while inequality has increased, other developed nations have seen an increase in poverty alongside declining levels of inequality. This latter situation matters as it is within country differences that matter, the OECD recommends that what needs addressing is the gap in inequality (OECD, 2011).

The old assumptions and associations are linked with under-nutrition as the manifestation of malnutrition. In fact the health links with poverty are more likely to be the new form of malnutrition -obesity often combined with hunger and micro-nutrient deficiencies. The food poor are not only food deprived but also probably financially, time and resource poor, if you cannot afford to eat what your contemporaries and neighbours are eating then you might be deemed to be in food poverty. This notion of a cultural dimension to food insecurity and food poverty is not

accepted by everyone, some politicians object to the concept of relatively and argue that outcomes are rooted in choice.

Caraher and Wells highlight media stories of food bank users making use of a system where no real need exists, this is the portrayal of the '*undeserving poor*' seeking out bargains so they can spend their money on other consumer goods. Additionally an argument is emerging that the business model of food banks encourages use and a demand where none existed before. In all of these debates it is not clear what constitutes or defines the '*deserving or undeserving poor*', except some vague notion of morals and subservience. Pascucci and colleagues report on this in the accounts of users of food banks, this expected behaviour reveals itself in terms of feelings of being a victim, shame and gratitude and the emotional rules of the encounter (Glasser, 1998). Some of the current debates exclude this perspective, portraying those on benefits as 'scroungers'/undeserving poor, this is possibly linked to the argument that the general public and even politicians overestimate what benefit levels are and the ability of people to cope on benefits (Bradshaw et al 2008). There is a sense of two things happening rising need and a rising tide of compassion. What is not appreciated is the stigma attached to seeking help and the admission that you cannot feed your family.

Most people who live with food poverty are not visible, they lead according to Seabrook (2013, p167) lives of '*heroic self-denial*', many times this self-denial is exercised by women on behalf other family or household members. Bradshaw and colleagues (2008) found that people with little experience or knowledge of the benefit system, significantly overestimate what benefit levels are and are taken aback when they find out what people are asked to live on. In fact '*most of those below the poverty line are unable to reach a standard of living that the public think everybody should be able to afford*' (p49).

The standard of living that one can afford is partially determined by access and availability of food. The American Dietetic Association (2010) takes this a step further and includes the use of emergency food sources in its definition '*the ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways*', and '*a sustainable food system*

that maximizes self-reliance and social justice without resorting to emergency food sources'. In this definition if an individual or family has to resort to a food bank they are food insecure! In the US a major food company launched a nutritious stew in cans designed for low-income consumers. Consumers were encouraged to buy these at the supermarket and then donate them to food banks. All done with the best of intentions –caring concern- but there was a backlash with many civic society organisations seeing this as a process of marketing and treating the poor differently (Saul and Curtis, 2013, see pages 233-236). From having origins in redistributing surplus food many of these organisations now find themselves as the prime source of emergency food aid and faced with an increase in demand. Berg (2008) reports that 84% of the more than 40.000 food banks in the US were unable to meet this rising demand.

There are, of course, a whole raft of food projects which try to help in other ways: growing projects, community owned and operated food co-ops; social solidarity stores all offer other ways of addressing food poverty within contemporary and normative ideals. These see the way forward through food democracy with people having a say in their food choices and involvement based on community ownership and mutuality. The French system of 'solidarité sociale' referred to earlier has given birth to an unusual movement in France and Belgium of social solidarity stores (Lagrola, 2013) where the model is:

local convenience stores where people with low income can buy everyday goods for about 10 or 20% of their "regular retailing price". This form of food aid was created in France in the 1980's, as an addition to a system of free distribution essentially meant for homeless or very poor people.

Instead, solidarity stores are meant for people with low income (working poor, unemployed, retirees with a low pension etc.) who can't afford buying food in "normal" supermarkets but who are, on the other hand, reluctant to benefit from charity. Giving people the choice between different products, and having them pay for it just like any customer of a regular store, and thus preserving their dignity, is the principle of social stores. It serves the purpose of stopping dependence on charity, and relieving beneficiaries from the feeling of being indebted. But their retailing activity is just but a pretext for larger solidarity actions: They are places where people can be listened to and exchange, where they are helped to get back or reinforce their self-esteem and their will to go back to the outside world. In order to help each and everyone rebuild links with society, and realize their own value and

competences, they organize many activities, such as cooking lessons, cosmetic workshops, parents-children activities, employment reintegration, etc.

(Source Accessed 11th November 2013, <http://www.epiceries-solidaires.org/news/social-and-solidarity-stores>).

A number of papers in this edition highlight the concern that food banks may undermine the state's obligation to respect, protect and fulfil the human right to food (see DeSchutter 2013, for a full discussion of this). Curtis, (1997, p. 208) asserts that *'voluntary food assistance serves a critical need but works deleteriously as well: to mask state failings'*. Poppendieck, (1998) shares this concern claiming that food banks have helped government *'save money'* by enabling legislators to choose with impunity reductions in already inadequate programmes of social welfare. In relation to food banking in Canada, Riches, (2002) contends that *'it is clear that the evidence of two decades of food banking in Canada confirms it as an inadequate response to food poverty while allowing governments to look the other way and neglect hunger and nutritional health.'* In relation to the rights of those who find themselves in need of emergency food assistance from food banks, Dowler et al (2001, p.119) ask a pertinent question, *'[W]hy should such citizens not be able to shop for food like everyone else?'* This issue of social justice and rights remains the key element of foodbanking to be addressed in future papers.

So where to from here? These articles contribute to our insights and the direction in which food banks and emergency food aid are developing, the internal workings and challenges that food banks and indeed the social challenges facing food banks in their operations. We feel there is a need for much more representation of the unheard voice of the user. It is clear that the public support food banks, albeit through volunteering and donations, it is not clear what the public, politicians and policy makers think of the long-term development of food banks, these remain issues for other researchers to explore. Another important issue requiring further analysis is the level of collaboration among agro-food firms, retailers and food banks. Specifically the issue of donations and sponsorship by the food industry to food banks is a major tool to increase their corporate social responsibility. These charitable activities can affect corporations' image and reputation but they can be also functional to increase the efficiency of the whole supply chain. Nowadays, food emergency and the increasing

popularity of food banks can become a source of competitive advantage. According to Drucker (1974:) ‘*Social problems are dysfunctions of society and--at least potentially-- degenerative diseases of the body politic. They are ills. But for the management of institutions and, above all, for business management, they represent challenges. They are major sources of opportunity. For it is the function of business ... to satisfy a social need and at the same time serve their institutions, by making resolution of a social problem into a business opportunity*’. Several corporations in both food industry and retailing sector have adopted programmes aimed at a reduction of food waste through a close collaboration with food banks. These activities call for public private partnerships (PPP), business relationships established between private-sector enterprises and Government agencies with the purpose of completing specific projects to the benefit of society (van Herpen, 2002). Further exploration of engagement strategies through the mechanism of PPPs are required to address the fault lines between private sector philanthropy/corporate social responsibility and the role of the state in providing a safety net for citizens.

We, as editors, wish to thank the BFJ for this opportunity to co-edit this series of articles, the contributors for their time, energy and insights, for their rapid responses to the comments of the reviewers and the reviewers who gave of their time as we pushed against time pressures. We are confident this is an excellent series of articles on an important topic at a key point in food security debates for the global north and will lead to further articles. We finally, while praising the quality of the contributions, point to a paradox that we are having these debates at a time when there are no real problems with overall food availability in the global north. There are issues with rights of access and affordability to food for some in our communities. The contributions come from countries of the global north which could not be classified as poor.

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