

Charitable food provision as an emergency response: sharing evidence from Canada, the USA and the UK

How do we overcome the growing levels of household food insecurity in the UK and remove the need for food banks and other forms of charitable food aid? What can we learn from the experience of people in North America where food charity has become embedded into the social system? These are the kind of questions that lay behind an off-the-record meeting held in London in November 2018 under the Chatham House rule - participants are not identified beyond saying that they included leading academics, activists and representatives of key organisations based in the UK, USA and Canada.

Below is a summary of the discussion which pulls together the points made about the North American experience, views and reflections about the situation in the UK and how to exit from the need for food banks and charitable food aid provision generally.

Summary

UK Food Poverty Alliance discussion with North American experts

PART 1: North American experience and views

The US experience – food banks, pantries and politics

- The welfare landscape, the support for poor people landscape in the United States is very different from most other OECD nations because so much of what is provided is in the form of food assistance.
- There are 15 separate food assistance programmes run by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). The total cost of those 15 programmes was \$98.6 billion dollars in 2017 but the great bulk of that was for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).
- The other factor is that food bank and food pantry (pantries are what would be called food banks in the UK) staff and clients and volunteers have a lot of legitimacy and credibility when they testify in hearings and interact with legislators and that's part of the US landscape that probably wouldn't apply in most other places.
- Anti-hunger advocacy has been a success story in the United States in that it has helped to preserve a food safety net when people were not able to preserve a cash safety net.
- In the UK, however, there is a cash safety net which shouldn't be allowed to be eroded away.

The institutionalization and corporatisation of food banks in the USA

- Food banks have become a downstream appendage of corporate America, especially the food industry. In the USA, food banks see themselves as social service agencies, very much institutionalized and not as social change agents. Secondly, food banks have a corporate style growth model. They are constantly trying to grow their poundage of donated food in their strategic plans by 3% or 5% or so. The third way concerns corporate money. This plays a very important role in the integration of food banks and corporations. Wal-Mart Asda is the single largest donor of funding and of food to food banks. It has funded every single one of 200 food banks with over \$2.5 billion over a 5-year period from 2010 to 2015.
- Finally, there is a problematic alliance between corporate America and the hunger groups through boards. There are very few incentives to end hunger because that

would be bad for business on many different levels.

Grassroots movements in the USA

- There are more than 70,000 community-based food access organizations around the country.
- Some grassroots organisations are hoping to begin to dismantle this entrenched hunger industrial complex. One network meets every 2 years and the numbers have grown from 150 people at their first meeting to about 1000 people expected in 2019.
- Because of the entrenched nature of this hunger industrial complex this network feels that a grassroots led social movement is the only thing that is ultimately going to create the transformation needed.

A Canadian perspective and the Right to Food

- In 1976 Canada, like the UK, ratified the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (the US remains silent). The *ICESCR* includes the Right to Food, Clothing and Shelter and an adequate standard of living. Under international law this obligates government as the 'primary duty bearer' to ensure food security for all. Despite this in 1981 charitable food banks came north of the border.
- Since then US style corporate food banking has proliferated in Canada slowly undermining its UK modeled rights based welfare state, income policies and social programmes directed at health and human wellbeing. Today the poor depend on the stigma and indignity of surplus food – edible food waste whilst denied the right to adequate income assistance.
- 'Joined-up' food and public policy through the Right to Food matters. It requires continuous monitoring and advocacy by civil society with a Right to Food 'bite', both collaborative and adversarial. It likewise requires a 'joined-up' civil society. Food justice is not only about food. Food policy must make common cause with the health, social justice, environmental and anti-poverty movements.

Part 2: Reflections about the UK and how to exit from the need for food banks and charitable food aid provision generally

Being clear about the goal

- The goal is to end hunger and poverty in the UK and to see an end to food banks, not the growth of them. This must be done in the most dignified way possible in developing exit strategies. The end for the need for food banks is about the end of poverty.
- Increases in food bank use are the tip of the iceberg as many people would rather go hungry than use them and so the overall strategy is to end poverty.
- There is still generally a sense that food banks are not a good thing. This must be fostered and activities ensure that this remains true. There is still broad support for state intervention in the UK. There is a minimum wage, not yet a real living wage but there are things that we can build on with a strong third sector that can be a movement for change.
- Partnerships, eg with corporate partners for those who have them, should not include any gagging clauses or stop groups speaking out. Where partnerships exist, partners need to be clear about their respective roles and the role in promoting the changes need to reach goal.
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Building a social movement

- “We’re a movement of people – people with lived experience and people who stand in solidarity with them. We can’t do this alone but if we can work together as a movement, as a united voice, in terms of what’s driving people to soup kitchen, pantry, food bank or to hunger then I think we can really end the need for us.”
- “The UK government needs to step up to the plate if we’re going to end hunger.” “We have a menu and policy agenda that can be developed with a coalition of national partners and we’re starting to get cross-party support.”
- “The key thing is to build support from the bottom up as the latent power of the movement, to take on and engage with politicians in a positive way at a local level” It’s in their self-interest to see that their constituents aren’t going hungry.
- Numerous local alliances have been developed, “all massively under-resourced but doing their best to coordinate and deliver more than emergency food aid.” Central to these projects are experts by experience.
- A network of member-run food clubs or local pantries is being developed with aspirations for a national network that could feed into the movement.

Beyond hunger and food insecurity to transforming food systems

- It’s not just about ending hunger but transforming food systems with a variety of groups involved.
- “We’ve been working as a coalition [in Scotland] on a Good Food Nation Bill, getting that into Parliament and basically the Right to Food is the cornerstone of that Bill.” “
- “There’s a consensus in Scotland, probably more than in the rest of the UK, that food banks are not the way forward.”
- “Part of the problem with food banks is that they don’t do any one thing well and it’s no disrespect but shops do shops better. You go in there, you pay your money and you get what you want. And there’s a great distribution system to get food into shops in the UK, it’s been running for 50 years. Let’s use shops, let’s use informal shops and a few community shops, great, they can work well but mostly main shops, real shops.
- “I think we should say that austerity is over and food banks are over. We need to declare it.”
- “The system of waste is endemic to our economics. The food industry has built a system where waste is built in so there’s a systemic issue in the whole structure of the food system which we also have to address.”

Making better use of what’s there now

- “We’ve had an opportunity to look directly upstream not at the food bank but at who is referring people to the food bank, why are they referring, what’s gone wrong with that set of services so looking round the table here where are the job centres, where are citizens advice bureaux, where are the union movement?”
- “And we know it works because in one part of Scotland they reduced the number of people going to the local food bank network by 22% just by better coordinating local services. That is not going to fix the problem, there’s a £37 billion gap in the welfare budget – that’s the problem – but there are things that we can do and we are not powerless to fix some of these services.”
- “We need to say we’re not going to do this any more and work one bit at a time, one town at a time, one part of Scotland at a time.”

Further points made during the discussion:

- ***Using surplus food to help system change***

“Surplus food, leftovers are not a solution to food poverty, they’re an environmental issue.”

- ***Reframing the language, social solidarity and missing voices***

The issue of language is important, but the problem goes deep. Referencing some long-term work on food poverty, those with lived experience objected to being referred to as poor or as hungry so there’s a long way to go to find something more positive. “If the problem is characterised as poor people’s then it will remain so, actually it’s society’s problem as a whole, these are problems that face whole societies, that is what the Right to Food is about, it’s everybody’s Right to Food.”

- ***It is solvable***

“It would be great to say this is how much it costs to solve hunger so we have a society rich in dignity. We’re here to solve it for good, we’re not ameliorating.”

- ***A big positive tent***

It’s “important to flesh out the coalition vision and what that really means – and to be positive rather than be *against* things. That is really hard when stuck with the stories that we all know about.”

- ***It is about income***

“You need to reconstruct the argument, this is an income-based issue. It’s an income-based issue for individuals. It’s a funding-based issue for all the social services that are there.”

- ***Expanding other organisations understanding of their impact***

“A lot of organisations don’t really get that their actions would have an impact on poverty reduction or food poverty reduction so there’s something about conjuring that common understanding of responsibilities”

- ***One piece of strategy is who to engage with, how and when***

“In terms of movement-building, food is a tool for organising. The movement is there. There are 5-10,000 community organisations that are mobilised around food.”

- ***Political will and tackling upstream causes***

“There is only so far that you can go in a local area, within a local community to reducing that burden but ultimately it’s a political issue and we need to work out how much campaigning we can do collectively.”

Concluding thoughts:

- It was not and does not have to be like this.
- “You know there was a time when there weren’t food banks. So, this is your opportunity. You can remember a time without food banks. In North America they’ve been around for 50 years, 35 years in Canada, the social construction is there and it’s endemic.”
- “People working on poverty are ignoring what’s happening at the top. It’s inequality not poverty that is the driving engine and we just ignore them and let them accumulate more and more. The resources you need to meet these needs in a dignified and rights-based approach are there.”
- “We are also signed up to the sustainable development goal for zero hunger by 2030, a pathetically unambitious target for a rich country like this, and we’re all asked to hold

Summary - UK Food Poverty Alliance discussion with North American experts 7.11.18. - Under Chatham House Rule

our governments to account for this as civil societies and we've signed up to that. "

Two strategies heard here are:

1. "Get people together to get ministerial responsibility identified" and
2. "connect and develop the movement and support people who are already engaged with this and others."