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Original citation & hyperlink:
Denning, S 2019, 'Voluntary Sector Responses to Food Poverty: Responding in the Short-Term and Working for Longer-Term Change' Voluntary Sector Review, vol. 10, no. 3, pp. 361-369.
https://dx.doi.org/10.1332/204080519X15698349753281

DOI 10.1332/204080519X15698349753281
ISSN 2040-8056
ESSN 2040-8064

Publisher: Policy Press

Voluntary Sector Responses to Food Poverty: Responding in the Short-Term and Working for Longer-Term Change

This is a post-peer-review, pre-copy edited version of an article published in *Voluntary Sector Review*. The definitive publisher-authenticated version will be available online in due course.

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Abstract:

This paper responds to the question of whether voluntary responses to food poverty are a sticking plaster without addressing the causes of UK food poverty. I respond to this question by drawing on a case study of running a holiday hunger project and reflect on three principles: being relational, encouraging participation, and working for justice. I conclude with three recommendations for how voluntary organisations can work towards both short and longer-term responses to food poverty.

Key words:

food poverty, holiday hunger, participation, justice

Introduction

Food poverty in the UK is continuing to grow, and more often than not it is the voluntary sector that steps in to respond to people's food needs at a local level. This paper addresses the question of whether voluntary responses to UK food poverty are a sticking plaster without addressing the causes of food poverty. This question has been asked both from within and outside the voluntary sector. For example, voluntary organisations such as the Trussell Trust have spoken of a desire to put themselves 'out of business' (Butler 2018) and campaign for longer-term change, and social scientists have questioned whether voluntary sector response are becoming ingrained in society (for example Dowler 2014, Lambie-Mumford 2017) as well as how volunteers might understand their response as being 'in the meantime' and politically engaged (for example Buckingham and Jolley 2015, Cloke et al 2017: 703, Garthwaite 2016).

To address this question, first this paper examines the scale and causes of UK food poverty. Despite government denial, social science and voluntary sector evidence shows that the causes of UK food poverty are related to welfare reforms and the failure of the state to address growing economic inequality. Secondly, the paper draws on a case study of the author's experience of running a project responding to holiday hunger. Through this case study the paper reflects on three principles proposed by the Church Urban Fund's (CUF) *Ingredients for Action*: being relational, encouraging participation, and working for justice (Denning and Buckingham 2017) in order to respond to the question of whether voluntary sector responses to food poverty can be more than a sticking plaster. *Ingredients for Action* aimed to explore the wider issues around responding to food poverty. It presented new data on the levels of food poverty in the Britain based on polling commissioned by CUF and conducted by ComRes with 2,048 British adults in 2017 that was weighted to be representative of all British adults by age, gender, region and socio-economic grade. I argue that whilst voluntary sector responses can respond to need in the short-term, these principles of being relational, encouraging participation and working for justice can facilitate a response that also works for longer-term change that engages with the state and the causes of food poverty. I conclude with three recommendations for how voluntary sector organisations can work towards both short and longer-term responses.

What is the Scale of Food Poverty in the UK?

There are an estimated 14 million people living in poverty in the UK (Barnard et al 2018). Food poverty is one dimension of poverty which refers to the quantity, accessibility and nutritional value of food. Food poverty in the UK has reached a level that has not been seen since the introduction of the welfare state (APPG on Hunger 2015). In particular, food poverty has increased in the UK since the 2008 financial crisis. Although there is no single measure of food poverty in the UK, an oft quoted statistic is the number of food parcels given out annually at Trussell Trust foodbanks – the UK's largest foodbank provider – which increased by 73% 2015 to 2019 with 1.6 million parcels provided in 2018-2019 (Trussell Trust 2019).

The UN Food Experience Scale categorises food insecurity as mild, moderate and severe (Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations 2015). When a person uses a food bank it is an indication that they are experiencing 'severe' food insecurity: they have had to 'reduce the quantity of food that they are eating' and have limited recourse to other sources of food or nutrition. However, 'moderate' food insecurity (when a person compromises the quality and variety of what they are eating) and 'mild' food insecurity (when

a person worries about their ability to obtain food) can also be problematic for people in the longer term and there is evidence that both are prevalent in the UK. CUF found that 14% of people asked had cut down on the amount of fresh food that they buy in order to save money more than one eight Britons asked had experienced anxiety about being able to afford enough food in 2016 (Denning and Buckingham 2017).

The scale and impact of food poverty extends beyond food. For example, food poverty can also result in social exclusion. Sharing food is central to many celebrations and social occasions but this comes with an associated cost (Fabian Society 2015). One in ten Britons in a weighted sample missed celebrating a special occasion in 2016 because they could not afford to do so (Denning and Buckingham 2017). In this respect, experiencing food poverty can affect a person's sense of identity and dignity, particularly when the media negatively portrays those experiencing food poverty (Cameron 2014). When a person relies upon the voluntary sector for food then this can interfere with their sense of identity and personal food practices; sharing food is an important cultural and communal practice that reliance upon others for donated food interrupts (Cameron 2014).

What are the Underlying Causes of Food Poverty?

In order for voluntary sector projects to be able to address food poverty in both the short and longer-term, it is necessary to understand the causes of food poverty. Although it is denied by the government (Alston 2019), evidence from across the voluntary sector shows that the causes of food poverty are predominantly related to changes in the welfare state. From 2017-2018, over 37% of referrals to Trussell Trust foodbanks were due to benefit delays and changes in benefits including delays in processing new claims, transferring between benefits, and as a result of benefit sanctions (Trussell Trust 2019). Despite government denial, there is also evidence that the introduction of Universal Credit has caused rising food poverty. One problem has been the time between when a person makes an application for Universal Credit and when they receive the first payment. In May 2017, Citizens Advice found that 11% of their clients applying for Universal Credit were waiting over 11 weeks to receive any income, and over 50% had borrowed money whilst waiting for payments. In a similar way, moving from welfare to work can be a cause of food poverty when there is a gap between the last benefit payment and the first wage being paid (APPG on Hunger 2015).

Low income and the rising cost of living have also caused rising food poverty. This affects both households in work and in receipt of state benefits to mean that it can be difficult to purchase food of adequate quality and quantity. Over 33% of people referred to a foodbank 2018-2019 cited income not covering essential costs as the cause (Trussell Trust 2019). In-

work poverty increased by over one million people between 2013 and 2017 (Schmuecker 2018). Precarious contracts are particularly an issue for young people because they can result in unstable incomes: the Social Attitudes Survey found that in 2017, 17% of people aged 18-25 were on precarious contracts with hours that could change at short notice, compared to 5% of people aged 36-65 (Kelley et al 2018). Furthermore, state benefits were frozen for four years from April 2016 (Campbell 2017). The rising cost of living has therefore not been matched by rising wages (APPG on Hunger 2015) or welfare payments. Evidence shows that this has affected poorer households disproportionately as they are spending up to 41% of their income on food, fuel and housing, compared to 17% for the wealthiest households (APPG on Hunger 2016).

Food poverty is therefore caused by factors that extend beyond the voluntary sector, meaning that the voluntary sector must engage with the state in order to work towards longer-term change.

Food Poverty and Children: Holiday Hunger

The number of children in poverty in the UK increased by 400,000 children between 2012 and 2017 (Joseph Rowntree Foundation 2017). One specific way in which children are affected by food poverty is through holiday hunger. Holiday hunger refers to children experiencing food poverty in the school holidays when there are no free school meals, and families face increased food and leisure costs. There are an estimated three million children in poverty and at risk of holiday hunger in the UK; one million who have free school meals and experience food poverty in the school holidays, and a further two million children who are predominantly from families experiencing in-work poverty and are not eligible for free school meals (APPG on Hunger 2017). As well as a clear health impact, one impact of holiday hunger is upon a child's educational attainment: studies have found that children who did not have sufficient nutritionally balanced food in the summer holidays returned to school with a lowered attainment compared to their peers (Feeding Britain 2017).

Holiday Hunger Case Study: Reflections on Being Relational, Encouraging Participation, and Working for Justice

Transforming Lives for Good (TLG) is a national Christian charity responding to holiday hunger through local churches running MakeLunch Kitchens that serve the equivalent of a free school meal in the school holidays, with many kitchens also providing play activities, and generally relying upon volunteers to run. Between 2015 and 2016 I established and ran one MakeLunch Kitchen 'Lunch' in a church in an area where deprivation was in the top 5% in the UK. During this time 774 meals were served to 103 local primary aged school children

by seventy-eight volunteers in the school holidays. My role was one of both researcher and project leader: the research element explored how volunteers are motivated by their faith to volunteer, and how they persist in volunteering. Forty-two of the Lunch volunteers opted into the research by completing diaries (twenty-eight volunteers giving 110 entries) and/or interviews (eighteen volunteers) on their volunteering experiences. This paper draws on their reflections (using pseudonyms) to augment my own reflections as the project leader on how Lunch endeavoured to achieve in practice a voluntary sector response to food poverty that responded in the short-term and worked for longer-term change. To facilitate these reflections, this paper makes use of three principles in CUF's I*ngredients for Action:* being relational, encouraging participation, and seeking justice.

The first principle from *Ingredients for Action* is being relational. Being relational emphasises people's common humanity; everyone needs food to live, and positive relationships are important for mental and emotional well-being (Denning and Buckingham 2017) as one volunteer reflected:

> *In food we share our fundamental dependency on the earth and on each other so it's hugely relational (Violet, diary, July 2015).*

As Sarah who was part of the host church leadership reflected, Lunch was established to relationally respond to need in the local community:

> *I think for us it's working with the community as a Christian, it's about actually what are the needs of the people we are working with and how can we best support them. (Sarah, interview, September 2016)*

Sarah emphasised how Lunch should be about 'working with the community' which echoes an asset-based approach to community development as opposed to "doing to" a community (Denning and Buckingham 2017). Each day at Lunch the volunteers and children sat down to eat together. At first the children were served food at the kitchen hatch, but this was changed to food being served to children and volunteers seated together at tables partly in response to a reflection from one volunteer, Camilla:

> *At the moment it feels quite transactional rather than relational. But being part of this project shouldn't just be about what 'we' can give to 'them' but also about what we gain from being in the presence of the poor, in their closeness to God. (Camilla, diary, July 2015)*

Camilla's theological reflection shows that she wanted volunteering at Lunch to be a relational experience that broke down the idea of "giver" and "receiver", an idea which Violet added to as the volunteers and children eating and playing together allowed relationships to develop:

> *I think things like Lunch mean we all become more human. Rather than acting like cogs in a machine, we all give, we all receive, and we become a community. (Violet, diary, October 2015)*

Eating together at Lunch therefore helped to develop a sense of community at Lunch, and also responded to the aforementioned social isolation aspects of food poverty. However, whilst building a sense of community at Lunch, it did mean that children were not eating in their family units. Therefore, on reflection as the Lunch leader, I could have extended this principle by inviting the children's parents/guardians to eat at Lunch, or food also being taken home.

The second principle from *Ingredients for Action* is encouraging participation. Following TLG's model, Lunch was based in a church in a local community, however, it also drew on volunteers from outside the local area. This meant that people from a wide variety of ages, occupations and backgrounds came together to volunteer. Paul, on the Lunch church leadership team, reflected that being part of the national charity TLG made a difference to people wanting to be involved because it 'catches people's imagination' (Interview, March 2016). Building upon this, Daniel, a leader at a wealthy church outside the local area, reflected on the opportunity for participation that Lunch gave after his church had previously not acted on a motivation to be involved in responding to poverty:

> *And the issue as we talked about it, and as we searched how to do that, was how can we in this posh area… do something at [host church area] without it seeming patronising or we're doing good-goody works... And we struggled with that to the extent of not really coming up with anything. (Daniel, interview, September 2016)*

This shows that whilst participation was an important part of Lunch, through volunteers' Christian faith, it was not simply responding to food poverty that was important, but *how* they responded that was important. Within appropriate safeguarding policies, volunteers were also welcomed with varying capabilities: the Christian ethos of Lunch meant that I endeavoured to value each volunteer for what they could contribute which Jack reflected on being affected by:

> *I was deeply moved at the training meeting at the arrival of two ladies each over eighty.* (*Jack, diary, August 2015)*

One of the oldest volunteers, Tony, shared a conversation he had with a child at Lunch:

> *Child: "How old are you?"*
>
> *Tony: "How old do you think?"*
>
> *Child: "57"*
>
> *Tony: "Older than that"*
>
> *Child: "67"*

Tony: "Up a bit"

Child: "77"

By this time eyes widen in disbelief… So we reached 84. Pause.

Child: "You must be VERY old"… She returns to scratching the card whilst absorbing all this. (Tony, diary, April 2016)

The impression that Tony and the child made upon each other does not address the longer-term causes of food poverty. However, their meeting at Lunch resulted in social participation that would not otherwise have occurred, and building upon Daniel's reflection, this facilitated people from different backgrounds meeting and learning about each other, which in the longer-term can help to build societal understanding and greater awareness of different people's needs in society. With the level of stigma associated with poverty in the UK, such interactions are important in creating longer-term change in people's views of each other. Furthermore, recognising that eligibility criteria can result in unnecessary stigma and exclusion, Lunch welcomed any primary school aged child from the local area. To further encourage participation, some activities encouraged the children to take part in cooking lunch, and we sought their suggestions of their food preferences as well as encouraging the children to try new foods and eat more fruit and vegetables – as noted in the causes of food poverty, these are often less affordable for low-income families than cheaper high calorie food. Reflecting on participation was therefore important for how the short-term response took place but also for increasing social participation, relationships and taste preferences which can last in the longer-term.

The final principle from *Ingredients for Action* is working for justice. This principle recognises the injustice that people experience food poverty, and works to change this longer-term. In this respect, through the wider charity TLG, Lunch was not only centred on provision but also took part in advocacy – welfare reforms having been identified in this paper as the predominant cause of rising food poverty. Through TLG the Lunch project provided evidence for the APPG Inquiry into Hunger, and to Feeding Britain, for example on the number of meals served each school holiday. The research at Lunch was also referenced in Feeding Britain's (2017) holiday hunger report. This evidence supported the second reading of Frank Field's Meals and Activities Bill in January 2018. The principle of working for justice is perhaps the most challenging for Lunch because although contributing towards advocacy such as the Meals and Activities Bill has the potential for longer-term change through national, state funded holiday hunger provision, the government's denial of the link between welfare reforms and poverty (Alston 2019) has slowed change, although some government funding was provided for holiday hunger provision in summer 2018 and 2019. In turn, Lunch volunteers' reflections were often focussed on their short-term experiences at Lunch. When

reflecting on the possibility for longer-term change, volunteers were predominantly of the view that there needed to be political change, but expressed some apathy:

> *So I think at the moment Lunch should continue. But the other thing is I would like it not to continue but that's not going to happen. (Grace, interview, September 2016)*

That said, at the local level, at Lunch we worked for justice through endeavouring to reduce stigma often associated with food poverty, for example through welcoming all local children rather than having means testing. Volunteers also wrote of challenging others on their perceptions of people experiencing food poverty, for example Violet:

> *To my complete shock, he was utterly disparaging of the parents… "But we can't judge their situation, we don't know what's happened in their lives", I replied, feeling on the one hand that I really believe in the project and why we're doing it, but at the same time feeling slightly uncomfortable about arguing with one of the locals… (Violet, diary, June 2016)*

This shows the overlap between the principles of being relational, encouraging participation, and working for justice to take short-term change into the longer-term: Violet was not a local but perceived herself as part of the 'we' at Lunch, and defended the Lunch families when challenged on their situation by a local. Such conversations should be recognised in voluntary sector provision alongside for formal campaigning such as submitting APPG evidence because they can be important seeds for longer-term change in working for justice in challenging societal attitudes alongside state reforms.

Conclusions

This paper has addressed the question asked from within the voluntary sector, by campaigners, and across social science disciplines, of whether voluntary sector responses to food poverty can address both short-term need and work towards longer-term change to engage with the state and address the causes of food poverty. This paper has provided an example of how one project (Lunch) responding to holiday hunger endeavoured to achieve this in practice, using the CUF *Ingredients for Action* principles of being relational, encouraging participation, and working for justice to facilitate reflection.

In conclusion, the practice example of Lunch and reflections through the principles of being relational, encouraging participation, and working for justice show that it is possible for a voluntary sector response to be in the short-term and work towards longer-term change that addresses the causes of food poverty. However, the example of Lunch has shown that this is not without challenges. Therefore, this paper closes with three recommendations for voluntary sector organisations aspiring for short and longer-term change in practice:

1. Gather evidence and collect data on how your organisation is responding to need in the short-term, and submit this through appropriate channels (for example APPGs) to government for evidence of the need for longer-term change.
2. Develop an organisational strategy for where the organisation sees itself in five and ten years: do you still want to be functioning? If not, what could be done to meet this goal? To work towards longer-term change it is important that the short-term response does not dominate and become all-consuming.
3. Reflect on the principles of being relational, encouraging participation and working for justice in your organisational setting. Providing space at an away-day or through volunteers' diary writing is a way to learn more about people's perceptions at the grassroots of an organisation which can be fed into the organisational strategy. At Lunch, being relational was a means through which barriers between children and volunteers at Lunch could be broken down, which fed into encouraging participation at Lunch from volunteers of varying backgrounds, and the children cooking and eating new foods with the volunteers. The principle of working for justice resulted in the most challenging reflections because of the government's lack of engagement with holiday hunger. However, this reiterates the importance of projects such as Lunch in providing evidence on the scale of the issue, to facilitate longer-term change as well as short-term responses. At a local level at Lunch, working towards justice emphasised the need to break down potential stigma by inviting all local children to attend, and in challenging people's perceptions of poverty. Volunteers' reflections on their experiences can be important in addressing public attitudes and stigma towards people experiencing poverty in the UK.

Continual reflection on these recommendations can help to balance short and longer-term responses because both will then become integral to how voluntary sector organisations respond to food poverty, rather than a longer-term response becoming an add in.

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Funding details

This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council under Grant number GEOG SC3315.

Conflicts of interest

The Author declares that this is no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgements

Thanks go to Dr Heather Buckingham, the Editor and the two anonymous reviewers for their comments on earlier versions of this paper. I would also like to thank the Lunch volunteers and the support of the TLG MakeLunch charity with this research.