



Rights-based approaches to addressing food poverty and food insecurity in Ireland and UK

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ABSTRACT

Food poverty is an important contributing factor to health inequalities in industrialised countries; it refers to the inability to acquire or eat an adequate quality or sufficient quantity of food in socially acceptable ways (or the uncertainty of being able to do so). Synonymous with household food insecurity, the issue needs to be located within a social justice framework. Recognising the clear interdependence between the right to food and the right to health, this paper explores how international human rights obligations could inform approaches to addressing food poverty and insecurity with specific reference to Ireland and the UK. Little attention has been paid to how countries should meet their obligations to respect, protect and fulfil the right to food in developed countries. The paper contributes by examining the social and policy circumstances which inhibit poor households from obtaining sufficient food to eat healthily, along with strategies and interventions from State and civil society actors in the two countries. In practice, problems and potential solutions have largely been directed towards the individual rather than at social determinants, particularly as research on environmental factors such as distance to shops has produced equivocal results. Other key structural aspects such as income sufficiency for food are broadly ignored by the State, and anti-poverty strategies are often implemented without monitoring for effects on food outcomes. Thus scant evidence exists for either Ireland or the UK meeting its rights to food obligations to date, in terms of roles and responsibilities in ensuring access to affordable, available and appropriate food for all.

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Introduction

Food and nutrition have long been recognised as critical to health; in recent years their contribution to health inequalities in richer, industrialised countries has been more widely acknowledged and better characterised (CSDH, 2008; Robertson et al., 2004). Nevertheless, in terms of understanding and policy response, the relationship between social and economic circumstances and food and nutrition experiences is contested. Different framings, reflecting differences in meaning and problem formulation, further compounded by different disciplinary perspectives, lead to different understandings of the nature and causes of problems and thus to the formulation of appropriate response. So, for instance, research demonstrating inequalities in nutrient intakes and food patterns by socio-economic indicators (e.g.

Dowler, 2001; Irala-Estévez et al., 2000, among many) can generate assumptions about poor nutritional or household management, or social and cultural capital, with responses which seek to address those perceived deficits. Work which looks at foods and nutrient intakes consumed by those living in low income households (Anderson, 2007; Nelson, Ehrens, Bates, Church, & Boshier, 2007), potentially points towards more social welfare responses, although the 'information deficit' model is often invoked too.

The ways in which these framings generate policy responses are discussed in detail elsewhere (see Dowler, Caraher, & Lincoln, 2007; Lang, Barling, & Caraher, 2009, especially chs 3 and 8). Broadly speaking, policy responses within neoliberal states draw on a consumerist model which supports 'informed choice'; provision of appropriate dietary guidelines and product labelling are key responses whatever the households' social and economic circumstances. The default position is to question individual-level competencies within low income households, and focus on sufficiency of nutritional knowledge, and capacity to budget, shop and cook or make appropriate choice in institutions (canteens etc). That people should be able to get to shops stocking appropriate food,

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with sufficient money to buy it, is largely left to the market to secure, and the cost of food in relation to wages is not regulated. This is despite calls for focus on structural components of food and nutrition policy intervention (Lang et al., 2009; Prättälä, Roos, Hulshof, & Sihto, 2002; Robertson et al., 2004). Food policy is dominated by the individual choice model, where trade and financial rights govern entitlement, and the State's role is largely regulation of the food supply and retail sectors. There is scant recognition of food as a serious component of public health, or as citizens' rights (Dowler & Caraher, 2003; Drèze & Sen, 1989) and little attention to the food component of welfare. By contrast, recent work drawing on ideas from the majority world of household 'food security', which particularly stress food availability, affordability and access (Maxwell, 1996), highlights the potential of parallel discourses which frame 'food poverty' within entitlement and rights (Dowler, Turner, & Dobson, 2001).

Within work on 'poverty', by contrast, whether in academia, advocacy or policy, there is usually recognition that the ability to buy or otherwise obtain enough food is an important component, however the condition be defined (Spicker, 2007), with some emphasising the need to meet nutritional requirements and others, social norms of food behaviour (Dowler, 2002). State responses, addressing income through welfare or wages or neighbourhood regeneration, are often driven by parsimonious definitions of adequacy, which ignore real demands on household expenditure; area regeneration seldom monitors impact on food experience (Dowler, 2002). Furthermore, where State welfare has retreated, there is tacit reliance on the growing charitable sector to fill the gap; those challenging such responses in the US and Canada increasingly draw on rights-based approaches (Poppendieck, 1999; Riches, 2002, 2011).

This paper seeks to contribute to understanding the implications of a human rights agenda to address 'food poverty/insecurity' and resultant health inequalities. It emerges from ongoing work by both authors in their respective countries, engaging with the question of what it would mean for governments to meet their obligations to protect, respect and fulfil people's right to food, drawing on experiences in England/UK and Ireland as comparative case studies. The purpose is both to contribute potential advocacy material for social movements working on food insecurity and poverty in rich, industrialised countries, and to demonstrate where authorities in the case study countries could and should be taking better account of their obligations under the right to food.

Methods

We take an exploratory approach, drawing on secondary data and our own experience to examine the UN Statements on the Right to Food in the light of conditions and circumstances of two rich, industrialised countries. Notwithstanding work in North America mentioned above, literature on rights to food has largely been elaborated in relation to circumstances in the majority world, where conditions and state structures are often quite different. We draw on several years of academic experience in the respective case study countries, working with households who live on low incomes and/or in areas of multiple deprivation, to examine and analyse their food experiences and, in some instances, give voice to people's own accounts. Some of this work was to inform the practices of social policy research groups, some for specific government departments. This empirical research is supplemented by experience of working as members of teams carrying out large national surveys of diet and low income/poverty (we contributed to survey instrument design, sampling, implementation and interpretation); we harness some empirical results in our analysis here. Thirdly, we interrogate the academic, practitioner and policy literatures to

characterise those whose rights to food are being/likely to be infringed, to examine the means by which this occurs and implications for the future. Our experiences in committees, or as policy advisors, has offered opportunity to reflect on the possibilities for change. Finally, we benefit from discussions and output of a day-long workshop in Dublin, 2008, held under the auspices of the UCD Egalitarian World Initiative, with practitioners, policy makers and community activists, on using rights-based approaches to 'food poverty' (O'Connor, Walsh, & Cantillon, 2008).

The paper opens with a review of how rich country conceptualisations of food poverty and insecurity have evolved in a manner consistent with the use of rights-based approaches to health; we identify key components of the relevant UN Covenants and other parallel instruments. We then briefly set out the conditions and circumstances of the two case study countries: their commonalities and significant differences, in relation to food poverty and insecurity and health, including current shifts in responses to recession and economic crises. The framing of welfare and public health responses is then briefly examined, comparing and contrasting the approaches taken in the two countries. The difference that rights-based approaches would make to these interventions is then explored in terms of addressing food insecurity and poverty.

Framing food poverty/insecurity and the human right to health

'Food poverty' and 'food insecurity' signify "the inability to consume an adequate quality or sufficient quantity of food in socially acceptable ways, or the uncertainty that one will be able to do so" (Dowler et al., 2001: 12, see also Caraher & Coveney, 2004). In the US and Canada, food insecurity analysis has been critical for monitoring and welfare response; quantitative indicators were developed from original qualitative work with women experiencing hunger by Radimer (2002); (see also Tarasuk & Beaton, 1999). The converse, 'food security', a much debated and shifting term, is broadly recognised as the situation where "all people, at all times, have physical, economic and social access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life." (Riches, 2002: 92). It is used at global, national and household levels, and it is with the latter that we are concerned here. For industrialised countries, 'food security' implies that people have sufficient money to purchase the food they want to eat, to meet social as well as health and nutritional norms; that this money is not absorbed in other expenditure demands (rent, fuel, debt repayment, etc); that people can reach shops or markets which stock appropriate food at affordable prices, or they can grow or otherwise obtain food in ways which are dignified and in keeping with social norms. We should note that, even in rich countries, concern over household food security is emerging because of the increasing volatility of food prices since 2008, at global and national levels, although knock-on implications for wages and social welfare are not yet reflected in policy. Thus, 'food poverty and insecurity' are not necessarily the result of supply failures; they are caused by diminished or failed entitlements to access food (Drèze & Sen, 1989). (Broader issues concerning sustainable global and national supply, also re-emerging on policy agendas, are outside the scope of this paper.)

Furthermore, there is growing recognition that the food system is creating new health problems, which exacerbate those faced by low income or marginalised populations (Hawkes, 2008; Lang et al., 2009). Caraher (2003) is not alone in arguing that academic and civil society discourse on 'food poverty' has begun to shift from notions of household insufficiency (of foods and/or [micro]nutrients) to recognition that widespread promotion and availability of

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