

Viewpoint

FOODBANKS ARE AN IMPORTANT BAROMETER OF CONTEMPORARY POVERTY: DEVELOPMENT EDUCATORS SHOULD TAKE NOTICE

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‘Shelter line stretchin’ ’round the corner,
Welcome to the new world order,
Families sleepin’ in their cars in the Southwest,
No home, no job, no peace, no rest.’

(Bruce Springsteen, Ghost of Tom Joad, 1995)

Two conflicting narratives have dominated the aftermath of the financial crisis, particularly over the past year. On the one hand, the Irish and British governments are suggesting that we are over the worst and on the path to a more prosperous future and, on the other, frontline care providers speak of people cut adrift by the state and left in highly vulnerable, dangerous and impoverished conditions. Barometers of this impoverishment include rising homelessness and the use of foodbanks in addition to the distribution of food parcels and hot meals to those on the poverty threshold. A striking feature of those on the frontline of the recession is the number of working families affected by rising food prices, mortgage arrears, rental increases and flatlining wages. While the notion of class was once considered destined for the dustbin of history, we today find capital concentrated in fewer hands and a swelling of the ranks of the working class; a class which Terry Eagleton suggests creates the social order through ‘silent persistent labour’ and yet ‘can find no real representation within that order, no full recognition of its humanity’ (2011: 166). The recourse to soup kitchens and foodbanks in the twenty first century points to a fundamental flaw in our economic model that can generate so much wealth and leave so many wanting.

Foodbanks are in many ways reflective of the best qualities and values underpinning civil society and the non-governmental sector. They are staffed and supported mostly by an army of volunteers giving selflessly of their own time and dedicating themselves to the welfare of those in urgent need of support. The food distributed at foodbanks is mostly donated by the public as well as schools, businesses and churches. The Trussell Trust, the main supplier of foodbanks in the UK, was named Britain's most admired charity by the chief executive officers of UK charities such as has been its impact on civil society (Trussell Trust, 2013). At a time when public trust in charities has been wavering (NPC, 2014), the Trussell Trust has garnered respect from all sections of civil society for addressing the urgent need for food aid in vulnerable communities.

This article considers the gap between government rhetoric on the recession and the increasing public access of emergency food aid, particularly through foodbanks. It considers the recent spike in foodbank numbers and users, and outlines some of the factors behind this including evidence presented on the operations of a foodbank in north Belfast. Finally the article meditates on the significance of foodbanks for the work of development educators and development workers.

A tale of two recessions

In a recent budget statement, Irish Minister for Finance Michael Noonan said 'We are well along the recovery path and it is time now, as a nation, to begin to look forward' (Department of Finance, 2014). These words probably sounded a bit hollow to Estelle Sweeney, mother of three young sons, who spent eight nights sleeping in her car at the back of Dublin airport after being forced to quit her rented accommodation over outstanding arrears (Holland, 2014b). Her story is not uncommon as a total of 170 families in the Dublin area are living in hotels 'as a combination of rapidly increasing rents, caps on rent-allowance and an unwillingness among many landlords to accept rent allowance is forcing an increasing number of low-income households out of the housing market' Homelessness among families, said Dr Dáithí Downey,

Deputy Director of the Dublin Region Homeless Executive, is ‘bloody awful and about to get worse’ (Holland, 2014a).

The British Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, appears to be equally divorced from the realities confronting vulnerable families. ‘Britain is turning the corner’ he said, letting the ‘mounting evidence of recovery speak for itself’ (Brogan, 2013). This evidence will presumably not include the statistics on foodbank use in the UK released by the Trussell Trust for 2013-14 which show over 900,000 people in crisis receiving emergency food. This total represented a 163 percent increase on usage compared to the previous year with the number of new foodbanks (45 percent increase) unable to keep pace with demand (Trussell Trust, 2014b). These statistics suggest that the austerity-led response to the financial crisis in Britain, Ireland and most other European Union member states, which has combined cuts in government spending with welfare ‘reform’, has deepened the recession and placed more working families at risk of homelessness, poverty and food shortages. This view chimes with the assessment of recent International Monetary Fund (IMF) research ‘suggesting that it had significantly underestimated the damage European austerity would do to EU growth rates’ (2013). The next section describes how poverty in the north and south of Ireland has manifested itself through the use of foodbanks.

Foodbanks in north of Ireland

In the north of Ireland, there was a dramatic leap in foodbank users from 1,987 in 2012-13 to 11,697 in 2013-14, with the number of foodbanks increasing from just one in 2011 to the current figure of fifteen (Trussell Trust, 2014a). More alarming still is the suggestion from Chris Mould, Chairman of the Trussell Trust, that these figures represent the tip of the iceberg as they don’t ‘include those helped by other emergency providers, those living in towns where there is no foodbank, people who are too ashamed to seek help or the large number of people who are only just coping by eating less and buying cheap food’. A survey conducted by the Trussell Trust and Netmums of 2,178 working families in March 2014 showed that: one in five working parents had to choose between paying an essential bill or

putting food on the table within the past year; 43 percent are ‘just about coping’ with balancing family budgets; and one in forty had used a foodbank, with 70 percent indicating that they would do so as a ‘last resort’ (Trussell Trust, 2014b).

Trussell Trust foodbanks operate on a referral basis where clients can receive vouchers from a frontline care professional. Each voucher can be redeemed for three days’ emergency food which can be accessed on three occasions. At the same time, clients are signposted to agencies that can provide more long-term solutions to their problems. The food is donated by schools, churches, businesses, individuals and through supermarket collections. There are now 423 foodbanks in the UK with two new foodbanks opening every week. They are sustained by 8,000 tonnes of donated food and staffed by 30,000 volunteers (<http://www.trusselltrust.org/stats>).

The north Belfast foodbank is attached to a church hall and staffed entirely by volunteers. It opens for two hours on a Tuesday and Thursday, offering three days’ emergency food to clients bearing vouchers. The food is donated mainly by churches and schools but is also supplied through special collection days at Tesco with shoppers asked to buy extra items as part of their weekly shop. They are given shopping lists of mostly durable items such as canned food, cereals and pasta which are collected by foodbank volunteers. The foodbank opened in August 2013 and by May 2014 had received over 1,000 users by May 2014. The main categories of ‘crisis’ are low income, benefit problems, domestic violence, sickness and debt. The largest category is ‘low income’ which represents people in low paid jobs unable to pay utility bills, cover food expenditure, mortgages and other items of essential household expenditure. The next largest category relates to benefit problems caused either by delays in receiving payments or changes to the benefit system. For example benefits can be withdrawn for failure to attend an appointment which would mean having to process a new claim and lose state support for several weeks. Clients are also categorised by ‘family type’ with the largest being ‘single’ (29 percent) followed by ‘family’ at 21

percent. Almost half of food recipients are children (494) which is unsurprising given Save the Children's (2014) estimate that the number of children living in poverty in Northern Ireland is 110,000.

Foodbanks in the south of Ireland

The main distributor of food through foodbanks in the south of Ireland is the charity Crosscare based in Dublin. Crosscare has operated a food distribution warehouse since 1989, supplying food to charities such as St. Vincent de Paul, Dublin Simon, Focus Ireland and its own centres for the homeless (<http://www.crosscare.ie/>). Given the worsening economic situation in Ireland and increasing demand for emergency food aid, Crosscare established four new community foodbanks in Blanchardstown, Bray, Swords and Tallaght. Crosscare estimates that sixty families per week receive support from each foodbank and so has plans to open foodbanks in Carlow and Cork. In 2013, Crosscare distributed 450 tonnes of reallocated food providing over 180,000 meals based on the calculation that one tonne supplies 400 meals (Crosscare 2013). This surplus food is supplied by manufacturers, retailers and distributors and much of it is normally used as animal feed by pig farmers and has been diverted to families in need.

Additional providers of emergency food aid in the south of Ireland include Twist Soup Kitchen Ireland which has opened premises in Athlone, Galway, Roscommon, Sligo and Tuam collectively feeding 300 people daily (<http://www.twistsoupkitchen.org/>). The Capuchin Day Centre run by the Franciscan Order provides nearly 600 meals a day six days a week as well as distributing 1,200 food parcels weekly (<http://www.capuchinfranciscans.ie/>). The food poverty charity, Healthy Food for All, estimates that one in ten people are living in food poverty in Ireland, which is defined as 'the inability to have an adequate and nutritious diet due to issues of affordability and access to food with related impacts on health, culture and social participation' (<http://healthyfoodforall.com/food-poverty/>). A common message beating out from all of these charities and community groups is that the pressure on their services is growing as the economic recession deepens.

Explaining demand for foodbanks

The Trussell Trust and other emergency food providers identify several factors that have explained the spike in foodbank use. These include: static incomes, rising cost of living costs, low pay, under-employment and problems with benefits. The latter is particularly prominent in the UK due to changes in the welfare system such as the ‘Bedroom Tax’. The Trussell Trust, 2014c) has found that ‘83 percent of foodbanks surveyed reported that benefits sanctions, which have become increasingly harsh, have caused more people to be referred to them for emergency food in the last year’. Another important factor in explaining foodbank use are food prices. A report from Advice NI (2013) found that ‘households in Northern Ireland came the closest to any UK region to spending 10% of their income on food with an average of 9.8%’ with the annual household bill in 2012 ‘joint-highest with London at £3,201’.

At a macro level, the decline in living standards and weakening of social protections has been closely linked to the austerity programmes implemented by Ireland, the UK and many of their European partners. Oxfam’s report, *A Cautionary Tale* (2013) has likened these measures to the disastrous structural adjustment programmes imposed on countries across the global South in the 1980s and 90s. Significantly, many of these countries, particularly in Latin America, have turned their faces away from the ‘slash and burn’ economics of the IMF and World Bank toward more interventionist programmes informed by social need rather than profits.

Development educators and foodbanks

Foodbanks represent an important element in the narrative of contemporary poverty and development educators should take notice for the following reasons. First, the rise of foodbanks signals an increasing derogation by government to civil society of responsibility for the welfare of the poor in both Britain and Ireland to civil society. Rather than interceding on behalf of those on the front line of the recession, governments seem content to allow civil society organisations to take the lead in providing emergency care. This creates a dangerous dependence on emergency aid and often denies full

citizenship to those wrestling with day-to-day survival who are unable to address the fundamental causes of their inequality. As Amnesty International suggests: ‘people living in poverty have the least access to power to shape the policies of poverty and are frequently denied effective remedies for violations of their rights’ (n.d.).

Second, if foodbanks become increasingly institutionalised and woven into community life we may simply manage the problem of food shortages rather than address the deeper structural causes of economic injustice which give rise to these shortages. To remove the need for foodbanks we should change economic trajectory away from the downsizing of government and withdrawal of welfarism. Since the onset of neoliberalism in the 1980s we have seen the gradual removal of the social and economic safety nets that characterised the post-war Keynesian consensus of a more mixed economy that was based on the need for social constraints on market excesses. Third, foodbanks have an intrinsic social stigma linking users to poverty, social under-achievement and economic dependence. The Trussell Trust has suggested that most clients use their services reluctantly and many more refuse help because of the stigma attached to foodbank use. And yet we know that many foodbank users are hard-working, have paid jobs and struggling to manage in these recessionary times. Just as we reject and challenge the stereotyping of the poor in the global South so development educators should reject media profiling of foodbank users as scroungers, skivers or freeloaders (Daily Mail, 2014). Moreover, we should connect the economic factors such as neoliberalism, debt and cuts in public services that create poverty in the global North and South to our development education practice (Ni Chasaide, 2012).

The rising use of foodbanks should be a wake-up call for governments as both contradicting the dominant narrative that the worst of the recession is behind us and pointing to a swelling of the ranks of the poor. Foodbanks are used reluctantly by the majority of users in times of real distress and probably signify a deeper and more widespread level of need that will become more manifest going forward. Development educators should

consider closely the implications of foodbanks as signifiers of government divestment of responsibility for social welfare and a ready willingness to pass on to civil society the cost of emergency food aid in times of distress and need. Foodbanks are further evidence, on the back of the financial crisis, that the neoliberal economic model is failing us and that austerity-driven solutions are exacerbating poverty levels.

Investigations by development educators into the increasingly prominent place of foodbanks in our communities should begin with the following questions: why should citizens in ‘developed’ societies such as Britain and Ireland need recourse to charitable food aid? How can we fashion debate on foodbanks within the wider global context of food shortages in the global South? How can we challenge the stereotyping of the poor forced to the point of food aid having been cut adrift by government? And how do we demystify government and media messages on the economy that fail to square with the lived reality of so many citizens?

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