LEVIATHAN

Banking On Kindness: An Analysis of Food Bank Operation in the United Kingdom

PAUL GERARD TOMLINSON evaluates the role of food banks in the United Kingdom as both charity and as a failure of government to reduce poverty.

While food banks may seem a mundane issue during an era where sensationalism is the main factor in determining government action (Robinson 2002), it is no less vital. Food banks and their close ties to their local populations are a crucial part of a conversation about community. This article will explore differing views of food banks as charitable and admirable on the one hand and a failure of society on the other. It will then examine the justifications and evidence for these viewpoints and their ramifications. From this, the relationship of food banks to surrounding communities, and the attitude which seems most suitable for a post-COVID world will be examined. Ultimately, a renewed approach towards food banks and poverty reduction needs to be adopted that centres community action.

While the quality of food on supermarket shelves has been an issue since the 1990s (Davison 1993), the lack of food and emergency relief in the UK is a relatively recent and quickly-growing issue. Food banks operated in 251 local authorities in 2014, up from 29 in 2009 (Loopstra 2015). One in six GPs across the UK referred patients to food banks in 2014 (Matthews-King 2014), and hospitals have reported increased treatments for malnutrition (Caplan 2015). Demand for food banks continues to grow, yet they seem unable to capture the nation’s long-term attention or political priority. Food banks featured in each of the UK’s political parties’ 2015 and 2019 manifestos (except those of the Conservatives)—and yet, media coverage has remained relatively low (Caplan 2015). One potential reason for this could be that some do not see increased reliance on food banks as a problem at all: leader of the House of Commons, Jacob Rees-Mogg, described the rise in food banks in the UK as ‘rather uplifting’ (BBC News 2019), while British journalist Robin Aitken, who founded the Oxford food bank, has gone further in saying they are a ‘cause for national pride’ (Aitken 2020). This perception of food banks harkens to the classic debate of ‘Welfare vs Charity’ in the community. Aitken argues that welfare could never go far enough to ensure food for every citizen, so those who fall through the cracks should embrace charity (Johnson 1970). This optimistic appraisal does not appear to be reflected amongst the British people; YouGov polling reveals that nine out of ten Britons see hunger as a problem in the UK (The Trussell Trust 2019). Emma Revie, the Chief Executive of the Trussell Trust (the largest UK food bank network), denounced her banks as a ‘sticking plaster’ over the root causes of widespread poverty (Butler 2020). Some posit that there is a middle ground in which combining both state, enterprise, and community could combat food poverty most effectively (Bartholomew 2020). Through an analysis of these differing viewpoints, this article argues that increasingly community-oriented action

Storage shelves of a Trussell Trust food bank in Rotherham, England, UK *Image: HASPhotos | Adobe Stock*

due to the COVID-19 pandemic could allow the UK to move beyond short-term or exclusionary food-banking practises.

Food banks as 'Big Society'

Since his election in 2010, former Prime Minister David Cameron advocated his policy of 'Big Society,' a merging of free-market capitalism with a communitarian ideology of volunteering (Walker 2013). The Conservative campaign described the degradation of social responsibility and rise in violent crime as causing a 'Broken Britain' (Gentleman 2010), and this patriotic blend of business with charity, facilitated through the moral reasoning of religion, was to be the remedy.

In theory, religious belief could be the ointment for a broken society; studies tied it to greater longevity (Kune et al. 1993) and a greater sense of social responsibility (Furbey 2006). The government in turn has not been blind to the role religion could play in fostering 'community;' the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs published a case-study that an 'annual church cycle of prayer and celebration contribute to a sense of belonging and wellbeing' (Farnell et al. 2006: 6). If these findings are taken onboard, the close ties between food banks and faith would indicate that they are a force for good within the community. In 2014, 43 percent of the food banks in the UK were operated by the Trussell Trust, which is a Christian charity. Around twenty percent were operated by other Christian groups, such as the Besom, 31 percent were run by individuals, and around four percent by the secular organisation FareShare (Clarke 2014). Taken together, religious organisations administer over half of all food banks in the UK.

Religion's role in motivating community volunteering cannot be understated, and data regarding the Trussell Trust, which is associated with the Church of England, verifies this connection. Although the Trussell Trust remains the trailblazer, countless similar food banks have since been founded, many with connections to a

variety of church groups and faith organisations (Church Urban Fund 2013). The role of churches in food bank volunteering has grown considerably in the past decade (Cooper and Dumpleton 2013). Indeed, the Trussell Trust has stated that food banks 'provide Christians with a tool for undertaking the social action work that their faith calls them to do' (Lambie 2013). This rhetoric is backed by action: Trussell Trust food banks are no longer intended to be a temporary failsafe, but are rather routine bases for those in need, with one food bank opening per week in the first half of 2011 (Lambie 2013: 16). David Cameron declared in 2014 that 'Jesus invented the Big Society,' and that his government was merely continuing his work (Withnall 2014). It is worthwhile exploring just how far food bank operation aligns with Cameron's comparison.

It is little surprise that religious organisations took it upon themselves to put the coalition's 'Big Society' into practice. The UK is one of the most multicultural communities in Europe, and religious communities other than Christians are involved with food banks. Islam is the second-largest religion in the nation (four-point-seven percent of the population to Christianity's 59 percent), and the clear link between Islamic scripture and a call for charity is evident (Office for National Statistics). One case study is the UK's 'only 24/7' Muslim Salma independent Food Bank in Birmingham, which cites as inspiration 'The Night of Power' (or the Laylat Al Qadr): the 27th night of Ramadan, alongside the Prophet Mohammed's teachings that 'no Muslim may go to sleep satisfied if their neighbour goes hungry' (Salma Food Bank 2021). The bank has helped thousands, delivering 150,000 food parcels and donating 920 tonnes of food as of 2021. Furthermore, religious denomination of the recipients is not considered with 95 percent of them are non-Muslim, and 80 percent of volunteers are of a different faith (Salma Food Bank 2021). However, despite the Salma food bank exemplifying religious inspiration for a non-discriminatory charity, the connection between faith and food relief is not always as seamless. Many Christian food banks, in contrast, have received complaints that they do not cater to certain religious dietary requirements (such as kosher or halal food). A study by the University of York considered 67 food aid providers in Bradford, a city with a 25 percent Muslim population, and found that numerous organisations have neglected religious food requirements which could lead to the inadvertent 'exclusion of ethnic and religious

Food bank donations *Image: michelmond | Adobe Stock*

groups' (Power 2017). Through these examples it is clear that religion's strong influence on food relief benefits many, but at a potential exclusionary cost.

Unholy Trinity: State, Enterprise and Charity

In contrast, the secular charitable organisation FareShare collects almost-expired ingredients from supermarkets and delivers these to charity bases (NatCen 2014). Since its pilot in 2012, the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the devolved Scottish Government have championed FareShare as a remedy for food poverty. The UK Government invested £16 million in FareShare in 2020 to combat a "winter of hunger" (Grocer 2020), and the Scottish Government granted £200,000 to FareShare as recently as August 2021 (FareShare 2021). Funded largely by the government, supplied by private business, and operated by volunteers, FareShare delivered to 900 food banks in 2018 (Bartholomew 2020), and support for the scheme has extended far beyond the halls of Westminster. Colette Rogers of the Public Health Agency appraises FareShare as a 'successful food redistribution model' that increases employable skills for volunteers and gives more than it takes: for 'every £1 invested, £8 of social and economic return will be generated' (Rogers 2014). Capitalism and its focus on increasing profit is one of the causes of growing poverty (Lohnes 2019). Interviews with FareShare volunteers suggest that the organisation has taken advantage of capitalist tenets to drive charity. For example, the high level of competition between supermarket retail chains leads them to 'copy each other,' so once one chain partners with FareShare, others are sure to follow (Mumford 2019). FareShare's multifaceted operations are a decided step away from the individualist mindset that poverty is a result of personal decisions, and should, therefore, be remedied with individual charity (Lowrey 2020).

FareShare's attempts to unite different groups to tackle food poverty are highly relevant in the wake of COVID-19. This said, no one strategy of dealing with an issue like food poverty is beyond criticism. A move away from government-led initiatives to tackle food poverty in favour of private enterprise and religious organisations could cause privatisation, marginalisation, and individualisation of poverty relief (Williams 2001, Lawson 2007). Privatisation is evident in the financial aid of supermarket chains, and some emergency food relief recipients have described the terminology of 'desperation' as alienating (Lister 2004). In an ethnographic study of food banks in an affluent suburb of Kent compared to a Welsh tourist town, anthropologist Pat Caplan (2015) describes the hours of paperwork required and the stringent requirements of eligibility vouchers that limit support for those who apply.

The increasingly symbiotic nature of food banks and local welfare apparatus is also a point of concern. Whilst the Trussell Trust's goal is that 'every town should have one,' groups such as the Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN) instead envisions 'a country without the need for charitable food and in which good food is accessible to all' (IFAN 2021). IFAN was founded in 2016 and has grown to be the second-largest food bank agency in the UK with 400 locations (ibid). It is differentiated by not requiring government referrals to prove eligibility and their stance that food banks should not act as a structure of communities but should rather be tools to push for permanent change (Bartholomew 2020).

Conclusion

While similar in their provision of emergency food relief, food banks run by Trussell Trust, FareShare, and IFAN all vary in practice and ideology. Trussell Trust lauds food banks as a vehicle not only for community support, but also to fulfil one's spiritual duty. FareShare has pursued collaboration with government and business, whilst IFAN has called upon the former to remind the public that although food banks are necessary, they are not the answer. Food banks serve the community, yet the different visions across groups

threaten to obscure the larger issue: a government failing to deliver the human right to food (Loopstra 2019). However, the community-driven mindset to tackle COVID-19 offers a unique opportunity for change. Rhetoric has changed, from Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher stating there is ‘no such thing as society’ to Cameron’s ‘Big Society.’ In real terms, however, poverty has increased, with three-point-two million children living on relatively low income by 2019/20 (UK Parliament 2021). This could suggest a certain apathy—if the British people are ‘in-doubt,’ they vote in such a way that ignores such statistics (Saatchi 2016). However, we know this not to be the case. For nearly two long years, the British people have joined together in a national effort against a pandemic to protect the NHS which serves us all, and to save the lives of countless others we will never meet. Although this article has explored different approaches to food banking, their volunteers and donations suggest nothing close to apathy. COVID-19 has gripped the attention and commanded collective action because, unlike hunger, it can kill anybody (Bhopal 2020). If COVID-19 has truly ushered in a new wave of community thinking within the UK, food banks could be the crux from which a renewed sense of community thinking emerges.

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