

DIGITAL DIGEST



“HOW THE RIGHT TO FOOD FOR CHILDREN SHOULD BE ONE PIECE OF A WIDER CAMPAIGN ON A RIGHT TO A MINIMUM STANDARD OF LIVING FOR CHILDREN.”

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A Mori poll for The Trussell Trust, published on 16 October in the Daily Mirror, showed that more than half the British public think food banks are an embarrassment to this country and 7 in 10 think they should not exist in a modern society. They think it's the government's responsibility to deal with it. They are right. More people than ever, 21%, say 'poverty and inequality' is the most important issue facing Britain - the highest rate since 1997. Once again – they are right. By 2021/22 we will be spending nearly £40 billion a year less on social security. The scale of these cuts, mostly falling on low income working age families and their children, has been enormous. And although a major culprit, benefit freezes, will end in April, there are as yet no plans to restore the cumulative, crushing blow to family finances.

Into the breach has stepped the concept of 'food poverty', with food banks a very visible consequence of inadequate incomes. Holiday hunger and schemes to alleviate it, plus provision of breakfasts in school represent an emergency response. We can't see children go hungry. However, while food provided in this way may well solve an immediate survival need, it does not address anything more than that. We don't have a shortage of food in the UK, we have a crisis of income. Enshrining a right to food suggests the answer is food and ignores the underlying causes of the income crisis. Solving food poverty with food alone is no solution.

CPAG has studied what drives food bank use – it is lack of income. We live in a country where food is plentiful. It is the lack of financial resources to buy food that is the problem. But many families also lack resources to pay for rent, clothing, toiletries, household goods including basic furniture and can't afford to pay for water or fuel to heat their homes and cook – all necessities. Elevating food above all else is not helpful and could be harmful. Not only does it side-line everything else people need to live on and participate in society, it risks a policy response that further removes people's autonomy and increases feelings of stigma and shame.

Last year, CPAG published research conducted by colleagues at UCL highlighting how it feels for families to go without food. Alongside stories of having to turn to food banks because of lack of money, children reported stigma and shame because they couldn't take part in social occasions with friends such as going to the local cafe. When we talk about a 'right to food', the focus is all on food. But these daily humiliations are all about lack of money and the independence that goes with it.

Rather than a right to food, we need to be focusing on ensuring everyone has a decent income. This is about addressing, and preventing, child poverty. People in food bank queues have resources so seriously below the average income that they are excluded from ordinary living patterns, customs and activities. Poverty denies families the dignity to make their own choices, leaving them constantly anxious about paying the bills or rent and excluding them from basic everyday activities such as meeting a friend for a coffee.

To address poverty, we need action on low paid and insecure work, investment in social security – lifting the two-child limit and benefit cap, restoring benefit values that have plummeted because of freezes, and increasing support for children through universal credit and child benefit – and action on the high costs of housing and childcare. We also need to ensure there is good advice in communities so that people can navigate the social security system. And reinvestment in crisis support like local welfare assistance schemes is needed so that people don't need to turn to charity provision like food banks.

Investing in extended schools is also constructive. Providing enriching activities before and after school and throughout the school holidays creates a level playing field where children benefit from the same experiences that their better-off peers already take for granted. These activities have also been shown to improve educational attainment. Meeting the dual aims of supporting parents to work as well as investing in children's futures is money well spent and provides a positive, decent context in which food could just happen to be provided for all the children present.

In the USA, cash payments to support people on low incomes have disappeared to be replaced by the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Programme (SNAP) providing public assistance in the form of an electronic payment card (formerly food stamps). With the rationale of addressing the risk that people on low incomes have diets "that are inadequate in quantity and quality", the payment card can only be used to buy food, with a long list of essential but ineligible items such as soap, paper products and household supplies. It is an elephant trap ready and waiting for a government looking

for an easy solution. The risk of it rises if we continue to elevate the need for food above all other needs.

As a response, food vouchers increase stigma and seriously restrict people's autonomy, denying them the right to decide for themselves how to meet their own family's needs. Vouchers deprive people of the dignity of having at least some choice over how they manage the strain of living on a low income. What's more, vouchers would provide food, but not the bus fare to get to the shops to buy it. Parents would not be able to buy a birthday present for their child and a child would not have spare change to buy a coffee.

We must do all we can to avoid a disastrous policy response to hunger and food insecurity in the UK. Enshrining a right to food will not help families pay the rent. It will not give families options about how to spend their money. And it will not ensure children can take part in vital social activities with their friends. Only an adequate income can do this. We must be ambitious about preventing and ending poverty rather than focusing on one symptom of it. Whenever we speak of the harm of hunger or food bank use, we must make loud and clear its cause – child poverty – and promote the right to a decent and adequate income above all else.