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Food Banks in East London:
Growth by Stealth and Marginalisation by the State

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Abstract

In debates about the formation of policies to alleviate poverty food banks are considered by some to inhibit the development of policies to address structural inequalities that account for poverty, social and health inequalities. By feeding hungry people food banks bring immediate relief, but, it is argued that the availability of emergency food removes pressures from policymakers to adopt a social justice and rights-based solution to address the causes of food poverty. Following her research on Trussell Trust Foodbanks two years ago Lambie-Mumford called for a debate on these issues before food banks become institutionalised (Lambie-Mumford 2013). In this paper we describe how a policy of dissociation by central government has created a space for food banks to multiple by stealth. The lack of policy debate has been accompanied by a largely absent discussion about how food banks operate in practice, and in this study we asked food bank managers what they do, and how they are coping with, and adapting to increased demand for their services.

1. Introduction

The origins of this research arise from our knowledge of East London and concerns expressed by youth workers, school teachers, and community workers about hungry children and young people arriving at their club or school. Concerns of these frontline workers included poor diets and how it negatively affects body image and the confidence of young people, and, at the same time, they realise that healthy foods are often too expensive for many families to buy routinely. The findings discussed in this paper are from a scoping study about how people are accessing food and the type of food they receive to inform a larger project on how best to grow and distribute affordable fresh food in East London. Food banks were an obvious starting point for researching food poverty and the names of food banks were drawn from a list of all food banks on the internet and selected to represent a geographical spread across the area. These criteria were compatible with our intention to find out what food banks do and their role and relationship with other local social and welfare providers. All those we approached agree to be interviewed and seven managers participated in the scoping study.[1] The interview data have been considered in a thematic way, rather than attempting to compare different foodbanks. A more complete understanding of the role of food banks would include interviews with food donors as well as those who visit the banks. However, the focus of this paper is primarily on food banks as organisations and what they do to explore if it might be appropriate to use food

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[1] Two out of the seven food banks were not franchised by the Trussell Trust. The semi-structured interviews, conducted between June and August 2013.

banks as a distribution point for fresh produce and if it was, to find out if they would be able to adapt to distribute fresh food?

We found that food banks are finding it increasingly difficult to operate as they were intended, and this raises questions about their viability and sustainability. This paper is structured as follows: firstly food banks are situated in the dominant discourse and central policy. Secondly, the responsibilities and tasks of managers are described followed by a discussion on how food banks work in practice. Three key factors that influence their everyday practices are identified; food and cash donors, vouchers and the humanity and compassion which makes food banks 'more than just food'.

2. Food banks and the rise of food poverty

Oxfam's recent report 'The Perfect Storm' highlights the intersecting serious challenges that are faced by the UK in relation to social concerns stemming from economic stagnation, increased unemployment, rise in the cost of living, falling incomes and squeezed public services (Haddad, 2012: 2). Recent briefing documents highlight poverty's unequal risk to health, also starkly drawn across genders, ethnicities and regional lines (Haddad, 2012: 2). Thus, a study focusing primarily on boroughs in East London offers a particular glimpse of the extent of the gaps between incomes and the cost of living, as the East End is historically characterised by overcrowding, poverty and poor living conditions (Butler & Hamnett, 2011).

This research suggests that poverty is not a fixed or stable category, and that it is often a problem of definition or language. In the wider cultural imaginary, poverty, it seems, wears a particular kind of clothing, and lives in a particular kind of place. Stereotyped thinking, at the behest of tabloid media, has meant that deprivation and need can be ignored, or disbelieved according to assumptions. Yet, this research will present a number of inter-related gaps that serve to carve deep lines in the social fabric of communities in the UK. Often cited as the sixth most wealthy nation in the world, the indicators of poverty in the UK shows that one in five people lives in poverty (Cooper & Dumpleton, 2013; Haddad, 2012: 2; Harrison, 2013). Poverty is about material deprivation, fewer opportunities, and stigma and persecution for conditions that are not necessarily borne by personal choices. People living in poverty face prejudice – labelled as cheats and scroungers – and have been used as political fodder in arguments about 'Broken Britain'. But what is rarely mentioned is the recognition that it is intersecting, complex and multi-directional factors that cause people to live in poverty, and that once people have 'fallen' into poverty it is very difficult to extricate themselves.

This is largely because of the complex working of the benefit system, which relies on bureaucratic paper trails, referrals and regular appointments to assess eligibility. Benefit delays have been cited as one of the primary reasons for the sharp increase in need for emergency food provision in the UK in 2012/2013 (Cooper & Dumpleton, 2013: 3; Haddad, 2013: 4-5; Morris, 2013). In addition, communities have faced rising bills and an increased cost of living – argued by David Hirsch as affecting the poor and marginalised at a 'greater premium than the wealthy' (Hirsch, 2013).[2] The housing crisis relates to what has been called an acute shortage before the global recession, with construction reduced and prices rising to unaffordable levels. Haddad reports that there were 1.77 million households on social housing waiting lists with the number of claimants for Housing Benefits increasing by 18% between 2010 and 2011 (Haddad, 2013: 4). The rental market is not secure, leading to precarious living conditions for a growing number of people, especially in London.

In addition, the labour market has been affected by the economic recession, with increased insecurity, more part-time jobs and zero-hours contracts.[3] Precarious labour affects families' abilities to construct budgets, and financial insecurity is compounded by confusing rules about jobseekers' benefits, meaning that people not in stable employment are more vulnerable. These obstacles to financial security have been rendered more extreme by the coalition government's public service cuts. These impact lower income families disproportionately – 'estimated to hit the poorest tenth of the UK population 13 times harder than the richest tenth' (Haddad, 2013: 4). Elliott and Stewart's (2013) analysis of data from the Department of Work and Pensions show a rise in absolute poverty among children by 300,000 during 2012.

This brief context of the impacts of policy point towards the disappearance of a social safety net, set within a social milieu that has grown more wary of the 'nanny state' and more disparaging of the legacy of the welfare state. It seems that welfare reform has become a political tool brandished as punishment for the previous government's inability to manage resources. These punitive measures are experienced more harshly by the poor. This is particularly worrying at a time when the gap between rich and poor is increasing through tax breaks and incentives (Glass, 2013; Hirsch, 2013). The main tension arising in the last two years has been the sense that food banks and other charitable activities are filling the gaps left behind after swingeing cuts to services, effected by the coalition government. Third sector and charitable organisations are placed in difficult positions as they attempt to justify allocation of resources. What is meant to be considered

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[2] Save the Children (2010) calculated a poverty premium of more than £1280 for the same basic good and services as better off families. For example, gas and electricity are disproportionately expensive, leading to low-income families borrowing to survive.

[3] In which workers are required to be available for work, but no stipulated guaranteed hours of work, and only paid for hours that are worked.

'emergency' food provision suggests that there is a social safety net that will eventually kick in and alleviate the need for emergency food provision– but this is called into question by the data gathered here.

Government figures updated for 2010–11, show that around 13 million people are in poverty in the UK. The Food Ethics Council estimate that of these, 4 million suffer from food poverty.[4] Tim Lang says that food poverty is 'worse diet, worse access, worse health, higher percentage of income on food, and less choice from a restricted range of foods' (cited in Cooper & Dumpleton, 2013: 4). Cooper & Dumpleton outline the situation in relation to food poverty, saying that the poorest people in the UK are paying more for their food than their richer counterparts.

> Research has found that a list of the cheapest available selection of groceries was up to 69% more expensive in some of the poorest parts of the country than in stores belonging to the same chain in richer areas (Cooper & Dumpleton, 2013: 7).

In this light, social franchise networks such as the Trussell Trust have stepped up to provide food aid to alleviate some of the hardships faced by people in the UK. The evidence of growing reliance on food aid can be seen in the enormous increase of food banks in the last year, with over 150 new foodbanks opened by Trussell Trust alone (Cooper & Dumpleton, 2013:5; Trussell Trust, 2013). Added to this, Citizens Advice reported that food bank enquiries jumped by 78% in the first half of 2013 (Citizens Advice, 2013).

3. Denial and marginalization by the central state

The dominant political discourse espoused by the conservative/ liberal democrat coalition has, in essence, marginalised, discredited and distanced itself from the proliferation of food banks through an adherence to neo-liberal thinking. The conservative political ideology of neo liberalism, and the 'invisible hand' metaphor used by Adam Smith (1776) to capture the self-regulating processes of the free market is most pertinent to understanding the marginalisation of food banks from the dominant political discourse. Smith's notion of the invisible hand became one of the main mantras of the modern neoliberal doctrine, advocating that the flows and the dynamics of the free market and free trade will eventually benefit the social fabric. Yet, there are serious weaknesses with the conceptualisation of the invisible hand, as it does not take into consideration that our social and economic landscapes are always already inscribed by unequal distribution of resources, information, access to power and knowledge, to name a few. A key problem of Smith's model and by extension the hubris of classical neo liberalism is the failure to understand that the economy is not a sphere acting and regulating in a vacuum; it is rather interconnected

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[4] www.foodethicscouncil.org/topic/Food%20poverty.

to social and cultural spheres. The Smithian metaphor of the invisible hand effectively captures the narrative of the Big Society. In short, the coalition government's rhetoric has insisted that the implementation of cuts (from 2010 to 2013) is counter-balanced by the suggestion that individuals, organisations and communities can and should step in to make provision for the wider social good. This is instead of relying on what has widely been referred to as the 'nanny state' which as argued has caused a culture of dependency. Such thinking erases the *a priori* inequalities.

This ideological stance has given rise to a policy of disassociation and has enabled central government to sidestep responsibility for the rise in use of food banks and created space for them to proliferate unchallenged. They have, for example, refused to allocate central government funding to support food banks, and the Department of Work and Pensions has declined to monitor the number of banks in the UK dismissing them as "absolutely not part of our welfare system" (Trebeck, 2013). This disassociation can be traced to statements by senior Conservative ministers who have made arguments that break 'credible' links between food aid, poverty and welfare. For example, Prime Minister Cameron has stated that welfare payments are set at a level 'where people can afford to eat' (Morris and Cooper, 2013), implying that the level of benefits are not contributing to food poverty. Arguments that delays in payment due to the inadequacies of the distribution of welfare and to sanctions that result in the withdrawal of payments are linked to people resorting to food handouts are refuted by assertion, as illustrated by the following statement by a Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) spokesperson: "The benefits system supports millions of people who are on low incomes or unemployed and there is no evidence that welfare reforms are linked to increased use of food banks." (Independent, 2013).

This suggests that not only is there a growing social crisis in relation to poverty, with evidence of increasing need reported by food bank management; there is also the suggestion that the state already provides too much support. Lord Freud of the Department of Work and Pensions made the suggestion that food bank users are chancers taking advantage of a 'free good' (Morris, 2013). He insisted that the recent sharp increase in people resorting to food handouts to feed their families was 'not necessarily linked to benefits sanctions or delays. He suggested more people were taking charity food because more food banks existed' (Morris, 2013). He appeared to argue that the increase in food bank usage was down to the increased supply of food banks, making the claim that this government has other welfare systems to support people. However, even though Freud's statement suggests he is out of touch with the realities of poverty in Britain, charitable organisations are concerned that current systemic failures in welfare provision are pressurising charities, schools and community-based organisations to 'take up the slack' in provision for needy and vulnerable people. In the recent most comprehensive report on food poverty.

Yet, one of the streams referring people to food banks is the Jobcentre Plus, which now provides vouchers for emergency food provision. Set against Lord Freud's statements about the Department for Works and Pensions making referrals, whereby "food banks are absolutely not part of our welfare system" and so the DWP has no obligation to monitor referrals to them' (Trebeck, 2013). This points to a systemic blind spot supporting communities where the state mechanisms fail to do so.

While data are constantly changing, journalists and third sector organisations have highlighted the unexpectedly large rise in the number of people forced to rely on food aid. Jay Rayner says that use has tripled in the last 12 months (2013), while Patrick Butler (2013) shows that there are clear links between welfare changes and the rise in foodbank referrals:

> More than half of the 150,000 people receiving emergency food aid from Trussell food banks between April and June were referred because of benefit delays, sanctions, and financial difficulties relating to the bedroom tax and abolition of council tax relief... The total number of recipients in the same three months last year was 50,000 (Butler, 2013).

It seems clear that food banks are 'filling a hole left by the welfare state' (Rayner, 2013). Harrison (2013) says the Trussell Trust[5] fed 350,000 people in 2012-13, which is 100,000 more than they expected, and that they are opening three new food banks each week. In other words, the 'success' of The Trussell Trust evidenced by its growth and geographic expansion ties in with the narratives of Cameron's model of 'Big Society' – so that charitable activity is a victory for government, rather than recognition of the growing inequality, rising poverty and need in the first instance.

By making these disconnections between the rise in use of food banks, increases in poverty and the restructuring of the welfare system, the policy on use of food aid in the UK is inconsistent with other policy goals. Further, by not working with food banks, opportunities to address health concerns such as poor diets and obesity, which are most prevalent in poor households, are missed. It is in this vacuum created by a policy of dissociation that the daily operation of food banks across the UK becomes an invisible hand in the social fabric to follow the Smithian metaphor, as they face a marginalization from the dominant political discourse.

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[5] The Trussell Trust is run according to the Social Franchise model (Lambie, 2011: 12-13), which means that the strategic vision of rolling out foodbank provision in every town is prioritised through 'faith-based social action' (2011: 13-14).

4. Managing food banks

We have no reason to believe that the activities of East London food banks are substantively different from those in other part of the country, and in East London they are well-established, medium sized and require high levels of organisational, managerial and leadership skills. Situated in low income areas, they are locally based, run by faith groups and community organisations, managed as charities and run by volunteers. Food banks are often located in unmarked buildings and people leave carrying plain or branded plastic bags full of food. As discrete places they are sensitive to any stigma and shame that may be associated with not being able to feed oneself or ones family. The managers we interviewed were typically volunteers and have many responsibilities: they proactively organise food collections, recruit, train or set up courses for, and manage between 50 and 70 volunteers, liaise with statutory and voluntary organisations, complete administrative tasks and ensure that recipients of food vouchers are welcomed and cared for. To set up and run a food bank a safe building is required to store food, capital funds for buying shelving, chairs, computers and preferably a van to transport food, and revenue funding for volunteers' expenses and buying additional food, for example. Thus fund-raising was another key task for managers. In addition, managers were coping with increased demand and two out of the seven food banks were in the process of setting up a second bank in a neighbouring area in response to worsening poverty.

All the managers were very busy, some had paid employment in addition to and their volunteer role as manager of a food bank. Some wondered if they could sustain their workloads. The following comments by a manager illustrates the volume of work, the need for training, and indicates some of the pressures faced by managers:

> Financially we need the support, there is a lot of paperwork, there is a lot, we've got 67 volunteers, so there's a lot of admin, we have to do training, we have to do Health & Safety, we've got to get people in to do First Aid and all that sort of thing, so it all takes money. It's a lot, people just can't come in and do food bank without us doing it that way, there's got to be training, and we're dealing with vulnerable people… You know people are coming from as George said, with addictions and there's mental health problems and stuff like that, so we have to be aware… (5)

Food banks are reliant on food and cash donors, operate a voucher system, receive people with humanity and warmth and often 'sign post' them to other services, as well as distribute food. Each of these activities are described in more detail to illustrate how food banks operate and how they have become integral to the provision of local social security and offer a 'safety net'. Food donors are typically supermarkets, and

individuals responding to calls for food at collection points. We observed that shelves were well stocked with food even though there was a sharp increase in demand. One manager gave an indication of the size of the increase: 'The figure is just terrible. Recently it sat around 100 monthly. When we started we were looking at maybe 30, 40 people in a month.' However, donated food is surplus to the requirements of the donor and not necessarily suited to demand, and often does not include basic foods. Indeed, managers spend time dealing with the mis-match between supply and demand and often rely on cash donations to buy food they are short of. One manager explained:

> Food comes in, but most times I'm short of sugar, I'm short of milk, I'm short of juice and I'm short of tea. These four areas. People tend to give more pastas –I have quite a lot of pastas, quite a lot of cereals, quite a lot of baked beans or so that I have to buy, so the little fund I'm getting goes into buying. (2)

This manager also commented that donated food was insufficient to meet the diets of minority ethnic communities, again reinforcing the inefficient and time-consuming system that is integral to running a food bank. The manager continues: 'so sometimes we have quite a lot of people that will come and what you'll have, they won't eat it, so I go outside my own way to look for things to add … but I'm trying to add some things for the African, Caribbean and the Asian people' (Interview 2). Thus, reliance on donors creates a precarious and time consuming arrangement upon which the organisation is dependent. Sometimes managers experienced bizarre situations; a food bank near the City received 50 tins of truffles and foie gras, for example, and challenging situations when well-meaning donors bring fresh bread and cakes which require prompt distribution. Stories of mismatches were endless and one manager explained how it creates additional problems for them:

> We've just got a supplier who wanted to give us £1,000-worth of frozen meat. We don't have the facility …. We've got here downstairs, we've got coffee beans – roasted in kilo bags, delivered. We don't know how to deal with it… But yeah, we do end up with stuff that we can't use or we come across food that we can't store. (1)

The supply of fresh food was intermittent and logistically difficult because cold storage was required to keep fruit and vegetables fresh. Whilst managers often commented on the generosity of donors and the key role local newspapers played in requesting donations and explaining the role of food banks, it was noted that food banks are competing for the same food and cash donors.

> If you let it go and don't contact, you don't chase it up, then that goes by the wayside. There'll always be another charity will grab it if we don't be on top of it. So that's the only thing I'd say, that it's hard. We don't do it for money - <Laughs> (1)

This situation further draws attention to the somewhat precarious existence of food banks in the longer term.

5. Vouchers and emergency food provision

Typically, food can only be obtained with a voucher and they are issued by statutory and voluntary agencies. The Trussell Trust voucher system enables a system of short term support to be maintained and for the Trussell Trust ensures that Foodbanks retain their 'emergency' intervention and to use it as a tool to hold agencies to account (Lambie-Mumford 2013: 76). Other food banks have adopted a similar model. Becoming a voucher holder is discretionary, in one area General Practitioners (GPs) have decided not to issue vouchers, for example. Agencies are approached by food bank managers, or act proactively to obtain vouchers from managers. Thus, all those who access food banks are known to an agency or organisation. One manager gave examples of local voucher holders and this illustrates that a wide range of agencies have identified that their clients require food aid:

> So the people that come here are people that are referred to us from Victim Support, from Job Centres Plus, from Social Services, Children, Adult Social Services, from the Mental Health Team at Goodmayes Hospital, Schools, Health Centres, Children's Centres, Probation Office... so they're already in the care of the authorities, do you see what I mean? (5)

The voucher system is also used by managers to defend themselves against critics who claim that food banks feed scroungers and in interviews they were very keen to emphasize that that they rely on the judgement of professionals to make decisions about need. One manager explained:

> we assume that the person who's referred to us, being a professional in their own right, will judge that this person is in need. When we phone these organisations we make it absolutely clear that they have to be this criteria, that person is in absolute need (1)

A further advantage of a voucher system is that it enables managers to set up a monitoring system and this also protects them from critics who are in denial that there is a rise in use of food banks. A manager explained:

> No the voucher is just like, it's the paper, it has the information about you and your background, who you are, the nature of your problem, it's for our own system also to put in our records because if not,

if I come out and say, 'I've served 100 people or x, y, z, amount of people, somebody can come and say, 'He's a liar.' The government can say I'm lying, so anybody can challenge me, but if I have the details of the people I've served, this is the figure, and they are and you can actually confirm, verify it from the agencies, because these are registered against the job centres, Children's Centres, social services, all these guys, so they are government agencies, so you can actually verify them, you can't deny it, you can't say no.(f2)

However, the voucher system also presented with some challenges that they found increasingly difficult to deal with and this included definitions of 'emergency'. The use of food banks, as intended by the Trussell Trust, was to 'plug a gap until appropriate agencies assist' (Lambie-Mumford, 2013: 83). In practice, however, managers were finding it difficult to work within this definition of 'emergency' food provision, and this was causing uncertainties. Poignantly, managers illustrated these dilemmas by using examples of those who they had seen on the day researchers' visited. Repeatedly they told stories were about people who came with no money and who needed longer term 'emergency' support. One manager said:

> … like today, there are people here who depend only on the food bank. I have some people on immigration here, they are not entitled to whatever, they are not working; I have people who are depending fully on this. I have families of domestic violence that at least dependent fully about six months on this (3).

Another manager drew on their experience of what happened on the day the researchers' visited and again delays in receiving benefits and having no money to live on was the common theme in the interviews:

> So today, before I left I got a phone-call from a children's centre saying there's someone that's come into the borough, domestic violence, and she's been here three weeks and she's sleeping on the floor – no benefits, no nothing. The typical profile of a domestic violence victim is that they're typically Asian, so they've got to go through the process of moving form a spouse visa to indefinitely to remain, then getting a national insurance number, then applying for benefits, and it takes 12 weeks sometimes. We will support them through that. We don't advertise it, but we do, because at the end of the day there are children involved and it's not their fault. So there's flexibility but we don't advertise it. (6)

Another common example of a new situation was the introduction of sanctions and the length of time welfare sanctions were used made it difficult to comply with the meaning of 'emergency'. A manager described their dilemma:

> We're having also some new challenges and developments recently, sanctions, you know, because the voucher is a limited time, for a limited period, but people who are on sanctions, the sanctions can last for months… At that point, that's it, they go beyond our procedure because we are not meant to keep serving them, but you see, this guy needs food, so it's kind of a big problem for us because there's nothing we know we can do about it… because we still have an interest in that person, the person's interest, the client's interest at heart, so that in case there are children there, not just leave them to just go on suffering because the sanction is there. So it just is a bit of a tricky… (2)

Most of the food banks included in this research operate under the auspice of Trussell Trust a faith based network that aims to 'provide emergency food to people in crisis.'[6]

6. Enhancing social cohesion: 'More than just food'

Managers made it clear that they were not just a food distribution centre and treating people with dignity and respect were core values of their service. One manager summed up this strongly held view and expressed their humane approach as a right: 'we see them as human beings, we see that they have their right to live, they have the right to enjoy… the right to benefit. That is what we are doing' (4). These views were underpinned by a Christian ethos where managers ran a Trussell Trust franchised Foodbank. Some managers were driven by their own personal experiences and explained how they gave them a better understanding of the social isolation, despair, and the harshness of living in poverty as well as societal injustices. The following comments from two managers reflect these positions:

> along with me being made redundant… I've been there myself, I've been through so much trauma myself. (5)

> I had an accident at work … It damaged my brain cortex's and so I suffered from nerve pain for many years, so I haven't worked since 2003… I ended up working in the mental health system as a tribunal assistant […] and that was my first experience of the injustice that happens in society that we don't know about. (6)

As a result of their beliefs and experiences managers often acted with compassion and were responsive to food bank users as human beings, and sensitive to their emotions. One example of this compassion and

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[6] See http://www.trusselltrust.org

belief in the 'right to enjoy' is illustrated by a food bank manager who invited users to a Christmas party and made them feel special by writing personal invitations:

> Everybody, every human being wants to be loved, to belong, to be accepted…
> Interestingly on 17th of December last year we organise a party here, a Christmas party for
> all the clients … Nobody had ever invited them for a party but we did that and I budgeted
> for 80 but this hall was filled with 138 people – some came with wheelchair and they were
> so excited, […] this [was] the first time they received [an invitation]… we personally
> wrote their name and delivered, post it to their house. (Interview 3).

Managers also put people in contact with other agencies so that they could attend to their different needs, as one manager explained:

> We don't really give them just food, we also find out, 'What are you doing about it, are
> you receiving support, are you receiving help, is something being done about it?' And
> then we can also signpost them and say, 'OK you go to this place, or you go to this place'
> (Interview 2)

Some managers talked about how they had no prior experience of working locally with social and welfare agencies and several said that they were uninformed about the roles and responsibilities of other agencies. One manager in particular proactively engaged with agencies and had arranged for Citizen's Advice to run sessions at the food bank. The manager explained:

> Myself as project manager, I'm in touch with a lot of the care professionals so I'm the link
> and I am purposely building relationships, there are quite a few of us that are going on
> courses or going on talks, so that we can find out what they're doing … Citizens' Advice
> Bureau, … so they're based here on a Tuesday. So clients can come and see them, you
> know, just literally be there, they are there for them …'. (Interview 5)

Managers described how they worked with many agencies with one saying 37 charities and another claiming to have 127 partners, all of which indicates how food banks are well integrated into local social and welfare services. Nevertheless the extent to which they are able to offer a temporary emergency service, as originally intended, is dependent on other welfare agencies (Lambie-Mumford 2013: 86) and managers were increasingly finding that services their clients required had been closed or withdrawn.

7. Discussion

As our discussion in this paper demonstrates, food banks provide a rich site for understanding more about the realities of everyday life for those living on low incomes at a time when government social and economic policies usher in a period of austerity. Our findings suggest that food banks act as a barometer to assess how at a local level state and voluntary agencies are responding to, and coping with an increased demand in services. Many issues raised in our study warrant further exploration and a few are identified below.

Firstly, the findings from our small scoping study raise broader questions about the effects of restructuring the welfare system on those who are hungry, who, by definition, are amongst the poorest in society. In East London the evidence shows how, in the absence of a state social security system acting as a safety net, people are turning in increasing numbers to food banks. One consequence of the cutbacks in public services is that local state agencies are also reliant on food banks to deliver their services, and job centres, schools, social services and probation distribute food vouchers. A larger scale study would be able to find out the extent to which the erosion of state social security system is increasing the need for food aid and the ethical issues that this raises.

Secondly, we have identified a yawning gap between the central government policy of disassociation from food banks and the realities of what is happening in local areas throughout East London – an increasing need to provide food to people who are hungry, not just for a short period of time in an emergency but over several months.

Thirdly, the intention of running food banks to provide emergency food to people in a crisis is showing signs of being an untenable model in austere times. Time limited support regulated through a system of issuing a few food vouchers to provide a 'breathing space' before welfare agencies took responsibility for providing longer term assistance is under increasing strain. Managers talked about 'flexibility' and 'going beyond procedures' and negotiating with job centres to secure more than three vouchers for families fleeing domestic violence, for example. Managers described how such negotiations were 'just a bit tricky' and how they were shouldering an increased workload, and increased pressures. These managers were, however, volunteers and the findings from our study raise questions about how tenable is it for food banks to be run by volunteers?

Finally, from the perspective of our original intention of our study, it is apparent that many food banks do not have the capacity to collect, store, and distribute fresh food. Many managers already have a plethora of tasks and responsibilities and the managing the relationship between supply and demand is a time-consuming activity.

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