Localised Multisectoral Food Policies are Urgently Required to Help Address Widespread Food Poverty and Insecurity Emergency During Covid 19: Reflections on Hunger and Modern Malnutrition in an Affluent Society

Lynne Kennedy*

Professor of Public Health and Nutrition, Zayed University, UAE

*Corresponding Author: Lynne Kennedy, Professor of Public Health and Nutrition, Zayed University, UAE.

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The Covid-19 pandemic has prompted many questions in our daily living. One of the fundamental areas affecting everyone is food. We know that some families are struggling to afford sufficient amount of food and there will be adults and children who will go to bed tonight hungry.

The proportion of households and families affected by food insecurity has increased dramatically in the UK since the start of the pandemic early 2020. This includes people in work, not only families on benefits, people with disabilities and long-term health conditions, the elderly or BAME.

For many families living in high income countries food insecurity, being able to afford basic needs such as fuel and food, has newly emerged. As Covid 19 impacts on national and local food supplies and the economy, access to food for all is no longer feasible. In the UK, although there is a sufficient supply of foods to feed the nation access to this is however unevenly distributed. A situation that reflects food security on a global level. UK food supplies are plentiful however certain foods, especially, staples and fresh fruits and vegetables, the supply chain has been affected and prices increased. Some foods may be restricted and retailers have, at times during Covid 19, restricted access to specific products, specifically tinned tuna, pasta, rice and flour. The combined effect of price increases, disrupted supply chains, rationing of staple foods, furloughed workers, business closures, redundancies, unemployment, school closures where children previously received foods have contributed to reduced access, availability and affordability of food for all in the UK.

As a professor in Public Health and Nutrition I am now in a privileged position, not only do I have a steady income I have a high level of nutrition and also food security literacy. This however has not always been the case. I am working class in background and as a single mother forced to work part time on a low income, I know what food insecurity feels like. I have lived in poverty and I have experienced hunger. I know what it is like to go without food in order to feed my children. As research demonstrates this is not due to fecklessness or, as a nutritionist, due to any lack of knowledge about a healthy dietary pattern; when money is tight or income falls, the only flexible item in the budget is food.

The ability of a government - national and local - to ensure sufficient food for its population, is recognised by the UN convention on Food Security.

‘Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life’

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This was later expanded to take account of growing evidence of the link between poor diet and disease, that member states should ensure that this was also sufficient to protect and improve public health.

Where a country, region, household or individual is unable to achieve this it is defined as Food Insecurity.

Food Security is recognised as a global and national indicator of Poverty. Poverty therefore exists where food security is an issue for people.

Even relatively affluent regions such as ours - an increasing number of households are unable to access sufficient amount or quality of nutritious and socially acceptable foods on a regular basis. Food Insecurity exists locally.

The UK and therefore this county have signed up to this convention and therefore all of us here tonight have an obligation to ensure that this right is upheld and poverty is acknowledged and addressed.

The consequences of not acting on Food Poverty are dear.

Food is more than a physiological requirement it is also a social and cultural requirement.

Inability to afford sufficient amount of food to meet basic physiological requirements will result in further inequalities in health and will have long term consequences both for individuals and society.

Despite rising concerns over obesity - modern malnutrition exists. Whereby children are presenting with malnutrition last seen at the start of the 20th Century. Clinicians report increasing cases of scurvy and rickets.

The burden of inadequate food - or food poverty - will increase family’s risk of preventable diseases in adulthood such as heart disease certain cancers and even Covid. Recent research demonstrates that people with inadequate food supply and a poor diet are more susceptible to covid or will take longer to recover; if at all. Demonstrating the impact of nutrition inequalities due to poverty.

This is also a question of equality and dignity. Some children go to school without breakfast and empty lunch boxes. Others have to rely on handouts - even those in employment - some resort to other means like dumpster diving and waiting for price reductions on soon to be out of date food at supermarkets on a daily basis

The UN declaration for Food Security - to which we are all signatories - calls for all people to access sufficient amount and quality of food, by lawful means, to meet basic nutritional and socio-cultural needs. That means not relying on hand outs and not resorting to stealing food or dumpster diving for food waste. Emergency food supplies should also be a temporary measure.

In this region we have rising numbers of families who are facing food insecurity - and therefore are facing food poverty - and by default are in poverty. This is evident by the increased demand on emergency food supplies including Food Banks, social super markets and accessing holiday hunger schemes.

This will require a shift away from justifying the problem exists to one where resources and efforts are targeted to levelling up in the areas of greatest need.

Action at the local government level is needed in order to develop effective multisectoral policies to address rising food poverty as a result of Covid.

Resources are finite however and our energy is best directed towards solutions; levelling up those communities that need help urgently, where people are supported to break out of the cycle of poverty. Evidence based policy solutions are available to guide action.

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