



Summary of *Food Poverty and Policy*

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Introduction

This study on food poverty and policy is an initiative of Combat Poverty, Crosscare and the Society of St. Vincent de Paul. It was prompted by direct experience together with research evidence of on-going food and dietary deficiencies among low-income households. The purpose of the report is to review the nature and extent of income-related constraints on food consumption in Ireland and to assess how existing policy responses to constraints could be enhanced drawing on international experience.

Food insecurity and inadequate diet are central to the experience of poverty. Yet, these issues have been largely neglected in policy debates about poverty in Ireland. At the same time, the growing policy concern over food safety and healthy eating has not reflected the specific issues facing low-income groups. This study, by utilising the concept of food poverty, provides a new understanding of food and nutrition issues from a poverty perspective and identifies ways whereby the needs of low-income households are reflected in the future development of food and nutrition policies and programmes.

What is food poverty?

Food poverty is not just about the consumption of too little food to meet basic nutritional requirements and the consequent adverse health effects. In food-poor situations, social and cultural behaviour is compromised as people cannot eat, shop for, provide or exchange food in the manner that has become the acceptable norm in society. Food poverty can be defined as follows:

the inability to access a nutritionally adequate diet and the related impacts on health, culture and social participation...

Living in poverty and social disadvantage imposes constraints on food consumption in three main ways.

- First, it affects food affordability through the choice and quantity of food that can be bought and the share of the household budget that is allocated to food.
- Second, it impacts on access to food through the retail options available and the capacity to shop in terms of transport and physical ability. The availability of storage and cooking

facilities is a further constraint on what foods can be accessed.

- Third, psychosocial factors determine food choice among socially disadvantaged groups. Personal skills and knowledge, social pressure and cultural norms interact with structural and economic constraints to produce a complex constellation of factors contributing to food poverty.

Evidence for food poverty

Social inequality in dietary behaviour exists in Ireland and socially disadvantaged groups in the population experience various aspects of food poverty. These groups...

- *Eat less well compared to socially advantaged groups.*

Socially disadvantaged groups in the Irish population show higher consumption of less healthy foodstuffs, lower levels of compliance with dietary recommendations and poorer nutrient intake. Restricted dietary habits, in relation to both consumed nutritional adequacy and access to nutritional foods, are clearly observed among poorer members of society, including people who are unemployed, people who are homeless, Travellers, older people, asylum seekers and refugees and households with children.

- *Have difficulties accessing a variety of nutritionally balanced good quality and affordable foodstuffs.*

Food prices and usage of retail outlets suggest restricted access to varied, affordable and quality foods by low-income groups. People on low income generally shop for food in retail outlets

that are less likely to stock a variety of healthy foods and when they do, are often more expensive than the less healthy option. The dominance of supermarkets, often located on the outskirts of towns, twinned with inadequate and/or expensive public transport systems, are key factors in food poverty. There is further restrictions on healthy options for the homeless and Travellers who have limited access to cooking and storage facilities.

- *Spend relatively more money on food.*

Whilst people on low income spend in absolute terms less money on food compared to the spending of higher social groups, a greater percentage of their income is spent on food. Purchasing is not necessarily of healthy options and reflects difficulties in accessing affordable healthy foods.

- *Know what is healthy but are restricted physically and mentally by a lack of financial resources.*

While socially disadvantaged groups display an awareness of what constitutes healthy eating, deciding on what to eat is a combination of factors and influences including personal and family preferences, attitudes, nutritional knowledge, social norms, access to shops and financial constraints.

Responses to food poverty

Whilst not explicitly naming it as such, various organisations are working to address the many issues associated with food poverty. At a policy level, food poverty per se has not received much attention and explicit efforts to alleviate the adverse implications of food poverty are sparse. Government bodies are not

directed explicitly towards addressing food poverty, but do recognise that income adequacy, provision of school meals, awareness of healthy eating and better transport contribute to preventing and alleviating food poverty. No specific action is taking place concerned with pricing structures and retail provision directed at low-income groups.

A greater awareness of food poverty exists among those working directly with socially disadvantaged groups or involved in the direct provision of food. Many of the initiatives targeting food poverty focus on facilitating the provision of healthy, nutritious food to vulnerable people through food banks and food centres, and at the same time seek to address the social dimension of food and relieve food-related exclusion.

Increasing the capacity of people to choose healthier options is done through breakfast clubs and community programmes that aim to develop cooking, budgetary and home management skills. Generally, the practical initiatives to address food poverty have developed in isolation from national policy.

Key issues and recommendations

No single approach to tackling food poverty can address the complex constellation of interrelated issues. Different approaches are necessary for different situations. Hungry people require immediate material and practical assistance in order to avoid harm to their health and survival. Food and dietary inequalities, whilst not requiring immediate action for survival purposes, will lead to continuing social inequality in related health and social outcomes.

The comprehensive approach required does not currently exist. The report makes recommendations aimed at ensuring that all groups in society have access to a nutritionally adequate variety of foodstuffs, that is financially affordable and physically accessible, and have sufficient knowledge, skills and facilities to make healthy food choices. The proposals are as follows.

- A coordinated approach is critical to effect change in regard to food poverty. This should be based on a food and nutrition policy which has as its main objective equal access to food for all members in society. This should be located within the framework of the National Anti-Poverty Strategy. Its effectiveness and implementation requires political commitment and leadership through a junior ministry, and underpinned by sustainable dedicated funding and a multi-sectoral steering committee.
- As access and availability are two of the main barriers to healthy eating among low-income groups, a strategy to tackle food poverty should redistribute resources through policies which reduce unemployment, give adequate housing for all, ensure equitable healthcare and education systems and provide an adequate income.
- Improving food supply and retail services should form a component of the strategy. A coherent approach to tackling food poverty should be evident across trade, transport, agriculture, health and social policy. This highlights the need for a

mechanism to poverty proof these key elements of public policy.

- Action is required to identify and address gaps in dietary knowledge and skills. The provision of accessible and culturally appropriate dietary information is critical to help maximise people's capacity to choose healthy foodstuffs. Similarly adequate access to cooking facilities and the knowledge and cooking skills required for healthy eating are crucial for implementing those choices.
- Support for community initiatives which increase access to food is strongly recommended. On its own, community action cannot be expected to overcome structural problems in accessing good quality affordable food, but should be part of an inclusive approach addressing both poverty and the wider food system. Specifically, support should be provided for local food partnerships as a means to identify and respond to local needs.
- Direct food provision has a role in addressing food poverty. The development and monitoring of direct provision of food needs to be located within a strategic framework addressing food poverty and social inequality in diet and should not be regarded as an institutional remedy. The food and agribusiness sectors have key roles to play through

corporate social responsibility. Food banks can provide the vehicle through which surplus food can be distributed in a sustainable and socially progressive manner.

- The gathering of evidence specifically relating to food poverty requires on-going research. A greater understanding and recognition of food poverty and social inequality in food is needed among policy makers, service providers, voluntary organisations and consumers. To address this, a food poverty network should be established which maintains a database of related activities and resource materials.

Conclusion

The report sets out evidence of significant inequalities in food consumption among low-income groups, reflecting a situation of food poverty rather than individual choice. To address this problem, it advocates a targeted food and nutrition policy initiative as part of the National Anti-Poverty Strategy. This policy would address financial constraints, affordability and accessibility of food, knowledge gaps, community initiatives, direct provision and food banking. It would also make explicit the role and responsibility of all stakeholders in implementing the policy.