

9 September 2018

Dear Professor Alston

**Call for written submissions – Interlinkages between poverty and the realization of human rights in the United Kingdom – Visit by the United Nations’ Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland from 5 to 16 November 2018**

The Consumer Management and Food Innovation team at Ulster University welcomes the opportunity to submit evidence on the above call. Our comments are attached and we hope you find them useful. We are content for o**ur written submission to be published on the website of the Special Rapporteur.**

**Yours sincerely**



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**About our response**

Our response focuses largely on food poverty. However, we make comment on poverty and human rights generally.

**Poverty in Northern Ireland**

The issue of poverty is significant in Northern Ireland where 18% of households live in poverty before housing costs and 15% live in poverty after housing costs, with children, older people and working age adults particularly at risk of poverty (Department for Communities, 2017).

Northern Ireland is one of the most deprived areas of the UK and has an above average dependence on welfare as income. Northern Ireland, Wales and the North East of England jointly had the highest percentage of income from state support (21%) (Department of Work and Pensions (DWP), 2017). The Institute for Fiscal Studies has identified Northern Ireland along with North East England and Wales as the areas most likely to see increases in poverty in the next five years as the welfare system in the United Kingdom is reformed (Hood and Waters, 2017). With the reform of welfare in the United Kingdom, areas such as Northern Ireland, the North East, the East Midlands and Wales are expected to suffer disproportionately as they depend on welfare with only half their income coming from earnings.

By virtue of our dispersed population, Northern Ireland consumers already experience high costs in relation to fuel and transport expenses which, in turn, increase their potential to experience poverty and social exclusion. For this reason, any collaborative effort is welcomed to reduce poverty generally and health inequalities; food, fuel, financial and transport poverty; and social exclusion more specifically.

**Food Poverty in Northern Ireland**

We at Ulster University are particularly concerned about food poverty among the Northern Ireland cohort of the United Kingdom and believe there should be every effort made to recognise the health inequalities caused by food poverty. The affordability of food is a worrying issue for Northern Ireland (NI) consumers to the extent that nine in ten consumers are anxious about the rising cost of food (Consumer Council, 2013). Food poverty manifests itself as a short-term dilemma of putting food on the table alongside the long-term effects of food poverty including the habitual consumption of poor nutritional quality foods to the extent that lower income consumers are compromising food and nutritional quality to satiate hunger. We know that food is considered to be the flexible item of the household budget and other competing expenses, including transport costs, may be prioritised over food which may result in decreased food expenditure with associated implications for nutritional quality and health.

**Measuring Food Poverty**

Recent United Nations’ data indicate that an estimated 8.4 million people reported having insufficient food in the UK in 2014, the 6th largest economy in the world (Taylor and Loopstra, 2016). Meanwhile an estimated 5.6% of people aged 15 or over in the UK reported struggling to get enough food to eat and a further 4.5% reported that, at least once, they went a full day without anything to eat. It has been concluded, based on these preliminary estimates, that the UK ranks in the bottom half of European countries (Taylor and Loopstra, 2016). Financial access to food is particularly concerning given the cost of living while emerging from an economic recession and other macroeconomic and external factors, including Welfare Reform. The issue is further complicated by the knowledge that NI has yet to fully implement Welfare Reform. Implications of a single Universal Credit benefit, paid fortnightly or monthly, coupled with benefit sanctions and impacts of the bedroom tax, for which NI housing stock is poorly prepared, are yet to be factored. Such financial access issues are further complicated with physical access issues due to the high level of car-lessness in NI, sub-optimal transport links and supermarkets’ locational policies to site at edge-of-town and out-of-town locations impeding access to healthy and affordable food.

Food poverty does not have a universally-agreed indicator therefore it is difficult to arrive at a factual figure for the extent of food poverty in NI. Research effort has been considerable in the NI context with disparate attempts to measure and quantify food poverty. For example, the Department for Communities’ 2016/2017 Poverty Bulletin identified 18% of the population of NI living in poverty. The Health Survey for NI (2016/17) published worrying food security figures whereby 5% of households reported that there had been at least one day when they had not eaten a substantial meal in the last fortnight due to a lack of money (this figure rises to 10% for the lowest income quintile). Previous research (2013/14 reported that 1% stated that they had ever cut the size of a child’s meal because they did not have enough money for food. This is a concerning coping strategy because typically where food budgets are constrained parents will reduce their meals to ensure their children are nourished with an appropriate-sized meal. To reduce the quantity of food they serve to their child(ren) is an indication of the extent of the food poverty experience in affected households.

Similarly the 2013 Poverty and Social Exclusion study in NI (Tomlinson et al., 2013) reported how households lack three or more of 22 necessities covering food, clothing, housing and social activities. Within those households over 115,000 adults and children (6.4% of the population) are not properly fed by today’s standards. In the context of such food impoverishment, Advice NI data (2014) identify how food banks had increased rapidly during the last year and the demand for their assistance had grown. Startlingly, reliance on such food aid has increased greatly in NI: in 2011- 12, 254 people received food parcels compared to 17,425 individuals in 2014-15 – the equivalent of a 6,860% increase in three years.

Unsurprisingly there have been calls for the routine collection and analysis of data to determine the extent of food poverty in the United Kingdom and NI. An April 2016 workshop, *Time to count the hungry: The case for a standard measure of household food insecurity in the UK* (<http://foodresearch.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Food-Pov-Alliance-report-25-04-04-16.pdf>), achieved policy expert consensus calling for the UK government and its devolved regions to quantitatively monitor the extent of food poverty in their respective administrations.

In the absence of government-endorsed data, Ulster University Business School conducted research with Causeway Coast and Glens (CCAG) Borough Council in 2015. The full report is available from: <https://www.causewaycoastandglens.gov.uk/uploads/general/CCAG_Food_Poverty_Report.pdf> In summary, our findings concluded that food poverty has reached a concerning level within the CCAG Borough, with affordability and accessibility proving important points of concern. Two in five (41%) respondents at risk of fuel poverty also reported being unable to comfortably feed themselves and their families three meals per day all of the time, and this statistic worsened among larger households, where 45.7% reported not being able to comfortably afford to feed their families all of the time. Twenty-two respondents (6%) reported rarely or never being able to afford three meals per day, while one in six (17%) reported missing meals because their food budget was inadequate (24.8% of larger households), and one in eight (13% of all households) reported missing a meal in the previous fortnight due to budgetary restrictions – an indictment of the severity of food poverty among this cohort. Three in ten (31%) reported being forced to make a choice between food and other essentials. More than half of the respondents (54%) reported some anxiety about whether their budget would fulfil their food needs. An important minority (13% – 40%) cited their inability to afford social activities that their peers may take for granted. This sense of being socially excluded from both low-cost, routine to more expensive, occasional activities is worrying given how social inclusivity contributes to quality of life. Respondents indicated support for various local authority-organised activities including quality, local food and cookery demonstrations to help overcome the negative repercussions of food poverty. The research concluded that efforts must be ongoing to address the structural causes of food poverty for a truly sustainable solution.

More recently, Ulster has commenced food poverty measurement research that aims

to investigate the inter-reliability of various food poverty indicators and determine if there is a single best fit indicator for NI to inform evidence-based policy making. Additional research objectives are:

* To disseminate four existing food poverty / household food insecurity indicators
* To determine if there is good agreement in terms of food poverty outcomes from two or more indicators for NI households; and
* To determine the single best household food insecurity measure for NI.

The research design will comprise an online consumer survey targeting NI householders aged 18+. Respondents will report their food poverty status via four indicators: EU SILC food deprivation measures (4-item measure); FAO 8-item measure; Household Food Security Survey Module (18-item measure); and household food expenditure as proportion of household income. The results will be interpreted and written into a cohesive report by the end of January 2019.

This work is eagerly awaited by the UK governments and third sector to facilitate the monitoring of trends over time and the identification of the population experiencing food poverty. It will inform the design of effectively implemented interventions and strategies with the purpose of alleviating food poverty. Developing an indicator will enable trends to be monitored on an annual basis, and will allow for more focused strategies and targeted interventions to tackle diet-related health inequalities in society.

There is a policy impetus for this research and political drivers from the public health perspective. For example, the cross-departmental obesity prevention strategy for NI – *A Fitter Future for All: Framework for Preventing and Addressing Overweight and Obesity in Northern Ireland 2012-2022* – seeks to develop a coordinated approach to food poverty as measured across a variety of settings across the population’s life course as important outcomes. Furthermore, *Making Life Better: A Whole System Strategic Framework For Public Health 2013-2023*, is designed to provide direction for policies and actions to improve the health and well-being of people in NI and to reduce health inequalities. NI’s anti-poverty and social inclusion strategy - *Lifetime Opportunities* - builds on similar developments at the EU and UK levels and structures its monitoring framework around ‘layers’ of relevance to this research question including poverty and social inclusion indicators.

We believe there is particular scope of super councils to assume some responsibility for monitoring food poverty and targeting effective interventions where evidence identifies constituents to be experiencing/at risk of food poverty. Localised community planning powers should also consider retail planning proposals on a case-by-case basis to prevent potential for *food deserts* to realise in town centres.

**Food is a Human Right**

Food is a basic right. According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights everyone has a fundamental right to be free from hunger and have access to safe and nutritious food. The 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), and the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child are both legally binding. Both explicitly name adequate food and housing as basic human rights. Article 11 of the ICESCR states that: *The States Parties to the present Covenant recognize the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate food, clothing and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions”.*

We endorse the Belfast Food Network’s rights-based approach to food poverty eradication and believe this approach should be regionalised across Northern Ireland.

We recommend that any response to (food) poverty adopts a co-ordinated and joined-up approach to government policy in the respective areas of anti-poverty and social inclusion.

We recommend that any proposed approach that seeks to address poverty and human rights issues should include the voice of the consumer / citizen and their representatives and advocates since consumers and their representatives should be inclusively consulted from the outset on decisions that ultimately impact upon them. We must not presume to know the solutions to issues that we have surmised rather than collated through experiential evidence and first-hand accounts from our most vulnerable citizens.

In Ulster University’s work on food poverty we devised a *6As model* whereby food policy must consider the accessibility (physical, economic and informational), affordability; availability; adequacy; awareness and appropriateness of food to and by consumers. To this we could also add anxiety – to take account of the mental health implications arising from (food) poverty. To this end, we opine that access to basic services and choice – including food, socio-cultural activities, and informational access – must not be depleted for consumers. Furthermore, physical access is compounded particularly for rural dwellers where they may experience the double disincentive of car-lessness and/or problematic access to purposive public transport amenities.

Any efforts here should appropriately address the structural causes of economic poverty. Importantly, we would make particular mention of food poverty as an issue for the Northern Ireland consumer. We consider it important to include food poverty on as many agenda and fora as possible given its status as a public health emergency in 21st Century UK and the lack of a dedicated policy for food poverty (beyond its citation in *A Fitter Future for All: Framework for Preventing and Addressing Overweight and Obesity in Northern Ireland 2012-2022).* Importantly, we believe there should be adequate funding of community and statutory initiatives to address this issue.

Ulster University Business School is research-active in the area of social exclusion and food poverty. We propose that Ulster University Business School can play a key role in supporting human rights in the following ways:

(1) Research - We have experience in securing government funding on a number of food-related projects;

(2) Graduate Research – We have a team of PhD researchers undertaking various projects focused on agri-food and consumer-related issues (for example, food poverty); and

(3) Special Interest Groups/working groups – We are keen to be involved in an advisory capacity on any special interest/working groups resulting from the Call for Evidence.

Through our extensive network of public/private companies within the food industry we believe that Ulster University Business School could be a key stakeholder in contributing to the success of the official measurement of food poverty in the United Kingdom.