**Response to call for submissions for the United Nations Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights to the UK Government**

This response underpins the oral evidence presented by Dr. Megan Blake at Bristol University on 6/11/18. The hearing focused on rural poverty.

1. Background:

I am an expert on food security and food justice. I have been working on everyday food insecurity in the United Kingdom since 2013. My research focuses on how to support communities to develop interventions that enable people to have the best relationship with food, themselves and each other and to work toward eliminating food access crises.

This research informs ongoing work with local level government in the North of England in Sheffield, Doncaster and Greater Manchester. I have also supported the practical work of a number of charities across the UK, namely The Bread and Butter Thing (Greater Manchester), FareShare UK, Community Shop[[1]](#footnote-1) and I work collaboratively with CSR officers in a number of commercial contexts, for example the Kellogg’s UK Foundation Report[[2]](#footnote-2)

1. General Points of reflection with reference to rural conditions as elaborated in this submission.
   1. Too many households are trying to survive on incomes that are inadequate to be able to meet their everyday needs and meet their rights to health, food, and wellbeing.
   2. Everyday food insecurity has negative implications for health and wellbeing. We are seeing strong correlations between weight and low income among adults and children, but also there are mental health related issues linked to feelings of isolation, loneliness and fear.
   3. The dual impact of poverty premiums and rural premiums makes access to food more expensive because of transport costs. In particular access to good quality healthy food is becoming out of reach for many, but especially those who are food insecure in rural areas.
   4. Welfare reform, austerity and Universal Credit are a toxic combination making life more difficult for people.
   5. Central government has devolved support to local authorities and charities while at the same time withdrawing resources, which is producing an uneven social support network. Within this context rural areas are the least likely to be served.
   6. National level data collection concerning everyday food insecurity, charity provision, and food access is inadequate, and although there have been efforts to introduce some of these measures they are being resisted by central government.
2. I give permission for my submission to be made public.
3. Elaboration of Key points
   1. **Too many households are trying to survive on incomes that are inadequate to be able to meet their everyday needs and meet their rights to health, food, and wellbeing.**

(1)The UK primarily uses measures of absolute poverty and relative poverty. The measure of poverty that is used to determine relative poverty is 60% of the median income.

(2) I would contend that this measure is easily dismissed by those who do not want to believe that there is income inequality in the UK, e.g.,

“ ‘Poverty and inequality go hand-in-hand.’ That is a tautology, since poverty is defined as a relative measure, [currently](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-42223497) 60% of median household income. If one had a magic wand that doubled the income of every person in the UK overnight, it would have no effect on poverty levels.” Public comment on an article about children’s poverty levels.[[3]](#footnote-3)

(3) The measure obfuscates the real experience of what the actual incomes are for the lowest 2/5ths of the population. Office of National Statistics[[4]](#footnote-4) calculations put the median household income for the lowest quintile at £7153/year and the second lowest at £13,877.

(4) I have had reports from charity workers and low income families that their weekly budget for food may be only £15 or £20. When budgets are this tight people are also forced to make decisions about what to eat.

“At the minute prices are rising. The cost of living is increasing. Wages are not very high. It is just costing you more to live. So you don’t really have the lifestyle or the social life because you are focused on accessing the food you need to survive…Its kind of like either meet or eat, you either pay for something to feed your kids or you pay for something to keep them entertained”. Sam, Director Edlington Community Organisation, Doncaster.[[5]](#footnote-5)

“I have weeks where money is tight, particularly during the summer when they are out of school. I have a teenage son and he does eat a lot.” Mum, Edlington, Doncaster.

* 1. ***Everyday food insecurity* has negative implications for health and wellbeing. We are seeing strong correlations between weight and low income among adults and children, but also there are mental health related issues linked to feelings of isolation, loneliness and fear.**

(4)While there are obvious health implications associated with hunger and not eating a healthy diet, there are other less obvious implications associated with the struggle to access food. One key aspect that is emerging is the way in which people are also missing out on social interactions. We have a [crisis of loneliness](https://www.jocoxloneliness.org/pdf/a_call_to_action.pdf)[[6]](#footnote-6) in the UK today. While the causes of loneliness vary depending on the circumstances of individuals, it is also clear that being unable to afford or access food also means that people forgo social interactions and this is political[[7]](#footnote-7).

(5)Mary McGrath, director of FoodCycle, reports that 71% of respondents to a survey of 629 people who attend Food Cycle meals feel lonely either sometimes or often.

"I lost my nan and then suffered a severe mental breakdown. It can be hard to get up and motivate yourself to do things.” John, 45, FoodCycle participant, Cambridge

“I work Monday to Thursday and I used to dread the weekend. I often would talk to no-one between the time I left work on a Thursday to when I came back on a Monday.” Janet 50 FoodCycle participant, Lewisham, London;

(6)There is clear research evidence[[8]](#footnote-8) that shows that those who have good social networks, even those who are poor, live better within the circumstances of their lives. There is also clear medical evidence that the presence of friends will make a difference to recovery rates from life threatening illnesses, [for example heart attacks](https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2015/01/friendship-for-a-healthy-heart/384746/).

(7)The decline in social ties combined with the lack of opportunities for young people has meant that people are also becoming fearful of the places where they live. These quotes from two mum’s attending a community led children’s holiday provision activity in a rural village in Doncaster describe this situation and also how this local provision is making it possible to reforge those ties:

“There is a lot of kids getting up to no good. (attending the holiday club) I think it is good for adults as well. You meet other parents and then can arrange to do other things.”

“A lot of these mums will not take the kids to other places, but here we know that we are all safe because we are here together and it is really good.”

* 1. **The dual impact of poverty premiums and rural premiums makes access to food more expensive because of transport costs. In particular access to good quality healthy food is becoming out of reach for many, but especially those who are food insecure in rural areas.**

(8) ***People experience poverty in their everyday lives and are confronted with it in the places where they live as they try to live out their lives.*** There is incredible geographical variation across the UK in terms of the cost of housing, goods—including food[[9]](#footnote-9), transportation, and services. Research demonstrates that convenience stores charge more for the same items compared to larger format stores. On top of this small stores have fewer product lines, tend not to carry the store own-brand value labels, and have a limited selection of fruits and vegetables.

Thus an income of £13K in an inner city neighbourhood where there is an adequate supply of public housing, convenient shops offering high quality food, and an abundance of support services will create an experience that is much easier to live with, compared to the situation of living in a peri-urban housing estate where there are no shops and where transport costs are high and services are few. Likewise, those living in rural areas will have a greater struggle to access affordable housing and will be forced to pay more to access food because transportation costs will take up a larger proportion of their budget.

(9)We know there is an urban bias in the availability of food shops. Despite the fact that available data is not at a sufficiently granular scale, research shows that there are more rural places where access to a supermarket than there are urban places[[10]](#footnote-10). The geographies used to capture census and other government data are normalised by population rather than their geographical area. As a result the referenced map has an urban bias with relation to how absence and presence links to poverty. As such, areas of low population density will be much larger geographically and therefor may not fully reveal the experience of lack of food access. In short, it is likely that incidences of poverty and food insecurity are hidden for those in rural areas by the way that national data is captured.

* 1. **Welfare reform, austerity and Universal Credit are a toxic combination making life more difficult for people.**

(10) Welfare reform is ***more than just Universal Credit*** and when combined with austerity cuts to local authority budgets and benefit freezes it has made a caustic situation for those who are the most vulnerable[[11]](#footnote-11). Other submissions have focused on individual elements of reform, but I wish to highlight a few issues (see also the report referenced in footnote 9).

* The two-child limit for Children’s benefit is not only adversely affecting children is has detrimental implications for women in particular and is humilitating.
* In work conditionality is creating a situation whereby sanctions are plunging people into debt and hunger as punishment for relatively minor infractions, such as missing or being late to a meeting. For those dependent upon an unreliable public transportation service, whereby delay may be compounded by longer distances, as would be the case for those in rural areas, can mean real and repeated hardship.
* The bedroom tax is still applicable even if local authority housing provision does not match household size allowances. As such, people are not receiving council tax discounts despite not having a suitably sized home to move into. Housing scarcity is more likely to be an issue in rural places.
* Young people aged 18-22 are also no longer able to access housing benefit. This has particular implications for those who are care leavers. It also links to the bedroom tax in that there is no allowance for children after 16 as they are expected to contribute to household finances. Given the limited employment opportunities and reduced national wage for young people under age 25, this combination seems a draconian mix intended to keep them and their families in poverty. Again a situation further exacerbated in rural places.
* A 4 year benefits freeze has contributed to increases in child poverty and recent budgets have done little to address this with most of the benefit being given to those in the highest incomes[[12]](#footnote-12),[[13]](#footnote-13).
  1. **Central government has devolved support to local authorities and charities while at the same time withdrawing resources, which is producing an uneven social support network. Within this context rural areas are the least likely to be served.**

(11) As I reported in 2015[[14]](#footnote-14), the present UK government does not have a firm commitment to addressing the right to food and the rights of the child to have adequate support and food. Austerity cuts to local authorities have meant a rollback in the provision of social support activities either through their outright elimination or through their relocation to more urban centres. We have seen a withdrawal Children’s centres and Citizen’s Advice Bureaux across the country.

(12) The Government is also looking toward civil society to fill this gap.

“We have always believed that churches, faith groups and other voluntary groups play an important and longstanding role in this country’s social fabric, running food banks, helping the homeless and tackling debt and addictions, such as alcoholism and gambling. In the short term it is evident that the public will need to rely on each other to support the most vulnerable, which includes the elderly and children” (Conservative manifesto 2015)

(13)There is no single central government department tasked with ensuring that our UN obligations concerning food access and in particular how this intersects with the rights of the child and the rights of those who are disabled.

(14) My research also reveals that local authorities are not fully aware of the charity provision that is being offered within their authority boundaries. As an indicator, however, my analysis of FareShare[[15]](#footnote-15) charities in Wales as measured against IMD decile and urban and rural designations shows a disproportionate representation in urban areas, while those areas that are most remote have almost no charity support available.

* 1. **National level data collection concerning everyday food insecurity, charity provision, and food access is inadequate, and although there have been efforts to introduce some of these measures they are being resisted by central government.**

(15) It is very difficult to know what proportion of the population is living in food insecurity and the UK does not have a government measure of household food insecurity. The Food Security Bill was introduced in November 2017 as a private members bill in the House of Commons. The aim of the bill is to require the Government to monitor and report on food insecurity and to make provision of official statistics[[16]](#footnote-16). There has been resistance to this bill being read a second time as it has now been postponed twice. The second reading is currently November 2018. Currently statistics that are used are based on a patchwork of information provided largely by charities such as the Trussell Trust.

(16) In the UK we also do not have a clear understanding of the number of food using charities that are providing support to those who are also likely living in poverty. The Independent food bank network has identified at least 2022 charities offering emergency food parcels. The surplus food charity, FareShare, has more than 14,000 charities on their books. Although the FareShare list does include foodbanks, the majority of the FareShare charities do not as their primary purpose act as a foodbank (foodbanks are more likely to rely on public donations rather than surplus food), but instead offer food and related support through other means (e.g., as a hospice or shelter, as a café or luncheon club, through children’s holiday provision). There are likely to be more food using charities out there, but without an understanding of what is happening where it is also hard to determine who is missing out altogether.

1. If you have any wish for further clarification or elaboration please contact me. My details are as follows:

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1. https://spark.adobe.com/page/SFGcDsQqYXt5u/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.kelloggs.co.uk/content/dam/europe/kelloggs_gb/pdf/Kelloggs_Food_Desert_Brochure.pdf> See also [https://geofoodie.org/2018/10/13/kelloggsfooddeserts/](%20https:/geofoodie.org/2018/10/13/kelloggsfooddeserts) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://theconversation.com/reality-of-poverty-in-newcastle-england-un-examines-effect-of-austerity-106098#comment_1768469> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/personalandhouseholdfinances/incomeandwealth [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This quote from Sam, as well as the anonymised quotes are available here: <https://videopress.com/v/razrx5HE> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. https://www.ageuk.org.uk/our-impact/campaigning/jo-cox-commission/ [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. https://discoversociety.org/2018/11/06/on-the-frontline-loneliness-and-the-politics-of-austerity/ [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0277953600002598 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. <http://www.smf.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/What-are-the-barriers-to-eating-healthy-in-the-UK.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. https://www.kelloggsfooddeserts.co.uk/ [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. https://www.academia.edu/35311700/Eating\_Affordances\_and\_Decent\_Helpings\_Working\_Together\_to\_Reduce\_Food\_Poverty\_and\_Improve\_Public\_Health [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/chancellor-philip-hammond-facing-calls-from-his-own-party-to-review-four-year-benefit-freeze-a7686076.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. http://www.cpag.org.uk/content/what-does-budget-mean-universal-credit-and-how-much-will-families-benefit-or-not [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. https://theconversation.com/why-one-of-the-wealthiest-countries-in-the-world-is-failing-to-feed-its-people-41872 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. FareShare is the UK’s largest surplus food redistributor. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. https://services.parliament.uk/bills/2017-19/foodinsecurity.html [↑](#footnote-ref-16)