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

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1. ***Background***

I am a social anthropologist with a long-standing interest in food matters, on which I have carried out research both in the Global South and the UK and have published books and articles. I also have an interest in human rights, about which I have also taught and published.

In 2014, I began a research project entitled ‘Food Poverty and Food Aid in the UK’ with case studies in the London Borough of Barnet and the County of Pembrokeshire in west Wales. In the course of this research I have visited numerous food banks and other organisations dispensing food aid (some on many occasions). Interviews have been carried out with clients, volunteers and trustees, some of whom have also responded to questionnaires, while I have been given access to reports by the organisations themselves and have also studied reports by national campaigning organisations. I have interviewed staff at several national food aid organisations including the Trussell Trust and Fareshare.

Because the purported solution to food poverty is increasingly seen by the sector, by the government and by the general public as the utilisation of surplus from the food industry, I have also interviewed supermarket managers and followed the recent growth in the provision of surplus food to food banks and other aid organisations (see Addendum at end)

Thus far I have published two articles in the academic journal *Anthropology Today* (attached) and set up a food poverty blog site (<https://sites.gold.ac.uk/food-poverty/>), as well as writing guest blogs for other websites, local newspaper articles and giving talks to the general public.

In what follows, I have tried to answer as many of the questions posed as possible, although some lie outside my area of expertise, notably in Section D. My focus is on food poverty, rather than poverty more generally, although obviously the two tend to go hand in hand. Following my answers to the questions posed, there is a short Addendum on p. 6. in which I highlight some aspects of my own research.

**A. GENERAL**

(1) What is the definition of poverty and extreme poverty that your organization employs in the context of the United Kingdom and to what extent do official definitions used by the state adequately encompass poverty in all its dimensions?

*In my research I focus on food poverty and employ the definition given by the UN Special Rapporteur Olivier de Schutter in his Final Report of 2014*: *‘The right to food is the right of every individual, alone or in community with others, to have physical and economic access at all times to sufficient, adequate and culturally acceptable food that is produced and consumed sustainably, preserving access to food for future generations.’*

(2) What is your view on the current official measurement of poverty by the government, what are the shortcomings of the current measurement and what alternatives would be feasible?

* *The major problem in the UK is that the government itself does not measure food poverty. There is currently a Private Member’s bill sponsored by MP Emma Lewell-Buck which should come up in October 2018. If and when passed, this bill would oblige the government to measure food poverty in the UK.*
* *The UK government has also frequently dismissed reports on the extent of food poverty by academics and by food aid and campaigning organisations. It is not a listening government (the Scottish government is rather different as I mention below)*

(3) What are the most significant human rights violations that people living in poverty and extreme poverty in the United Kingdom experience? Please exemplify by referring to specific cases and relevant norms of international human rights law.

* *The government is not honouring its obligations to ensure that its citizens are adequately fed*
* *It is relying on a volunteer-based system of food banks and other food aid organisations*
* *Clients of food banks and similar are highly stigmatised and their dignity is compromised by having to take food parcels to feed themselves and their families.*

(4) Could you specify how poverty and extreme poverty in the United Kingdom intersect with civil and political rights issues (such as for example the right to political participation or the right to equality before the law)? Please exemplify by referring to specific cases and relevant norms of international human rights law.

*No comment*

(5) Could you specify how poverty and extreme poverty in the United Kingdom intersect with economic and social rights issues (such as the right to education or the right to health care)? Please exemplify by referring to specific cases and relevant norms of international human rights law.

* *Children who have not eaten any breakfast (or have had only an inadequate one) cannot concentrate or learn at school*
* *Families with insufficient means to purchase a good diet suffer from poorer health. They often are obliged to purchase the cheapest food, high in calories, fats and sugars.*
* *Paradoxically, obesity is often a problem for the food poor and this is a growing problem in the UK*
* *The government has made only modest interventions in the ubiquity of unhealthy foods in supermarkets and fast food outlets, or in their advertising in the media*
* *The food poor often suffer from physical and mental health problems, some of the latter being associated with the stresses of trying to live on an inadequate income*

(6) Which areas of the United Kingdom should the Special Rapporteur visit in light of the poverty and human rights situation in those locations?

*There are pockets of poverty in most parts of the UK, even in areas of relative affluence. However, areas of industrial decline have suffered most greatly (south Wales, NE England)*

(7) Which individuals and organizations should the Special Rapporteur meet with during his country visit to the United Kingdom?

*Please note that I have focused on food poverty:*

* *Food aid organisations: Trussell Trust, IFAN (Independent Food Aid Network), Fareshare*
* *Some interesting examples of independent food aid organisations/food banks: Sufra in the London Borough of Brent, Patch in Pembrokeshire*
* *Research and campaigning organisations: Fabian Commission, Joseph Rowntree Trust, End Hunger UK, Churches against Poverty (CAP)*
* *Academic research: Poverty and Social Exclusion project (London School of Economics), Professor Liz Dowler (Warwick), Prof Martin Caraher (City University), Dr. Hannah Lumbie-Mumford (SPERI, University of Sheffield), Dr. Rachel Loopstra (Kings College London), Dr. Kayleigh Garthwaite (University of Birmingham), Prof. Jon May (Queen Mary College), Dr. Andrew Williams (Cardiff)*
* *Prof Terry Marsden (Cardiff), Prof Tim Lang (City Uni), authors of a report on Brexit and food*
* *London Food Board*
* *Food Foundation*
* *Media: Patrick Butler, Social Policy Editor at the Guardian newspaper has published many pieces on food poverty*
* *Scotland: Menu for Change organisation which advises the Scottish government*

**B. AUSTERITY**

Since 2010, successive governments have engaged in fiscal consolidation, the process of reducing the amount of fiscal deficit of the United Kingdom. This process is popularly referred to as 'austerity' or 'budget cutting'.

(8) To what extent has austerity been necessary given the fiscal outlook of the United Kingdom in the last decade?

*In the view of many economists, it is perfectly possible to run quite successfully an economy which is in deficit with its balance of payments*

(9) Have austerity measures implemented by the government taken adequate account of the impact on vulnerable groups and reflected efforts to minimize negative effects for those groups and individuals?

*Most emphatically not - on the contrary, it is largely the poor and vulnerable who have paid for the austerity measures*

(10) What have the effects of austerity been on poverty (and inequality) levels in the United Kingdom in the last decade?

*Dramatic! Large increase in social inequality, drop in social mobility, growth in homelessness and destitution, growth in clinically diagnosed malnutrition*

(11) Have the human rights of individuals experiencing poverty been affected by austerity measures?

* *Precarious and badly paid employment for many*
* *Drop in previous steady increase in life expectancy*
* *Worsening of health services*
* *Lack of housing and increase in rough sleeping*

(12) How have local governments been affected by austerity measures in the last decades? If possible, please specify the impact on public services such as police and fire departments, public libraries, and the administration of the welfare system by local authorities.

*Local authorities continue to have many significant responsibilities for their citizens, yet their grants from central government have been cut drastically and it is nigh impossible for them to raise council taxes. Their budgets have been cut to the bone – and beyond.*

(13) What alternatives to austerity might have been considered by governments in the last decade?  Could any such alternatives have had a more positive impact on poverty (and inequality) levels in the United Kingdom?

* *The benefits system(s) could have been maintained at a realistic level*
* *It could have been reformed in a more efficient and compassionate way*
* *The introduction of Universal Basic Income could have been considered and trialled*

(14) What are the potential implications of Brexit on austerity measures in the coming years?

*The prospect of Brexit is really chilling. I will confine myself to food and food poverty, bearing in mind that the UK imports a significant amount of its food and relies on migrant labour to harvest and process food which is produced in the UK:*

* *food prices are likely to rise*
* *safety standards are likely to fall*
* *there may be scarcities of some food*

**C. UNIVERSAL CREDIT**

Universal Credit, which was first announced in 2010, is a key element of welfare reform in the United Kingdom.  Its stated aims are to simplify and streamline the benefits system for claimants and administrators, to improve work incentives, to tackle poverty and to reduce fraud and error. The Special Rapporteur is interested in learning more about Universal Credit, including its impact on poverty in the United Kingdom and on the human rights of those living in poverty. Below are some of the questions the Special Rapporteur has in that regard:

(15) To what extent has the Universal Credit been able to achieve the goals identified above?

* *It is true that the previous system with its plethora of benefits was badly in need of reform. It was overly complicated and assigned responsibility for payment of benefits to too many institutions, making it difficult to understand and navigate*
* *However, in some quarters it has been seen as an opportunity to cut benefits and reduce the overall welfare budget*
* *The new system of Universal Credit is inefficient, results in significant delays in payments and is often administered in draconian fashion. It is the major explanation given for the recent dramatic rise in demand at food banks and other food aid organisations.*

(16) What has the impact of Universal Credit been on poverty and the lives of the poor in the United Kingdom until now? It would be helpful to also distinguish the specific impact of Universal Credit on specific groups, including for example children, persons with disabilities, women and other groups which may be more vulnerable on the basis of their identity and circumstances.

* *In areas where Universal Credit has been rolled out the overall impact on the lives of those dependent on benefits has been largely negative and in many cases disastrous.*
* *People who have suffered particularly include persons with disabilities, who are subject to testing regimes which often deem them fit to work when they are not.*
* *Similar issues arise with those with mental health or substance abuse problems*

17) Claimants apply for Universal Credit online. What has been the impact of Universal Credit being a ‘digital-only benefit’ on the ability of potential claimants to apply for this benefit? How does this relate to broadband internet access in the UK and the so-called ‘digital divide’? What is the role of public libraries and Jobcentres in enabling access to broadband internet for those applying for Universal Credit and have these public services been adequate for the purpose?

* *The UK in general does not have a good track record in terms of access to broadband and there is a marked digital divide between town and country, men and women, and by age and class.*
* *The new ‘digital-only’ benefit system is not user-friendly for many poor and vulnerable people who do not have access to on-line systems or are not computerate.*
* *Job centres do not have enough computer terminals for clients, nor do public libraries (which in any case have been closed in large numbers)*

(18) What has the impact been of various forms of ‘welfare conditionality’ in the context of Universal Credit in terms of incentivizing work?

* *People can only be ‘incentivized’ to work when there is suitable work available which is not the case in many parts of the country e.g south Wales where I carried out some of my research.*
* *A ‘job’ may mean work with zero-contract hours or work in the so-called ‘gig’ economy such as drivers and delivery people, or working for low rates of pay in the food and hospitality industries.*
* *Those who refuse work offered because of its unsuitability may be refused benefits or may be sanctioned, which means being off benefits for weeks at a time*

(19) To what extent has the introduction of Universal Credit reduced the incidence of fraud and error in the welfare system?

*It is probably too early to say whether Universal Credit has reduced fraud in the welfare system. However, this amount of fraud palls into insignificance beside the failure on the part of the wealthy and big companies to pay their fair share of tax, helped by the existence of loopholes in tax law and tax avoidance schemes including the existence of the UK’s off-shore sites.*

**D. NEW TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WELFARE SYSTEM**

*Note: not answered this section*

**E. CHILD POVERTY**

(25) What is the extent of child poverty in the United Kingdom, and how has it evolved over the last decade?

*Child poverty, the rate of which was diminishing, is now increasing again because of loss of tax credits, child benefit being paid only for 2 children, and the cap on Housing Benefit*

(26) What are the implications of child poverty for the rights enumerated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child?

* *The UK government is not meeting its obligations under that Convention.*
* *However, it is worth the Rapporteur investigating the rather different situation with the devolved government in Scotland.*

(27) What are the main causes of child poverty in the United Kingdom, what have been the main government responses, and how effective have they been?

* *Low parental income (whether from employment or benefits)*
* *Although the present government has raised the minimum wage, it remains too low for a decent standard of living*
* *The same is true of levels of benefit*
* *Capping of housing benefit has sent many families away from expensive areas*
* *The so-called ‘bedroom tax’ has also obliged many families to move into smaller accommodation*

**F. ‘BREXIT’**

(28) What are the potential implications of Brexit for the situation of those living in poverty in the United Kingdom?

At present, there seems little doubt that those living in poverty are most likely to experience the negative effects of Brexit:

* *They will find food more expensive to purchase*
* *It may be of lower quality as the regulation and inspection regime is loosened particularly with new ‘trade deals’ and the importation of food from countries with lower standards*
* *More broadly, if the state of the UK economy worsens (as seems not unlikely), austerity policies will continue*

(29) What are the potential implications of Brexit in terms of protecting the human rights of low-income groups and of persons living in poverty?

* *The welfare state in UK as it was set up after World War 2 was conceived as one which looked after its citizens ‘from cradle to grave’. Working citizens paid National Insurance to ensure that they would receive income when sick and a pension when retired. They paid taxes so that there could be publicly funded health and education systems.*
* *This is no longer the case: social welfare is no longer seen as a form of insurance and a citizen’s entitlement, the National Health Service is struggling as is public education while private schemes are growing, so that the existing divides in health, morbidity, education and attainment are only likely to increase*

(30) To what extent does government planning for Brexit explicitly address the issues arising under questions 28 and 29 above?

*It would appear that it does not. Several academic reports have voiced concerns about the likely impact of Brexit on food availability, price and quality in a post-Brexit UK*

**Addendum based on findings from my own research**

1. ***Food aid organisations and the normalisation of food poverty in the UK***

It is important to look at the relationship between food poverty or insecurity, and the forms of food aid which have sprung up in the UK in recent years, especially food banks. Food aid organisations are run by volunteers and they rely on food (and monetary) donations from the general public and sometimes from corporations. For the public at large, food banks appear to be the solution to food poverty, and have effectively become a ‘normalised’ part of UK society.

1. ***Food aid, entitlement and stigma***

The majority of food banks use a voucher system and these are handed out by variety of organisations including job centres, citizens’ advice bureaux, community centres etc. Food bank clients thus have to ‘prove’ entitlement before they enter a food bank. It is considered highly demeaning to be forced to use a food bank by both clients and the public for the following reasons:

* It suggests that one is not able to manage one’s life or budget
* It obliges the client to accept a food parcel the contents of which they do not choose (or only in a minimal way as in ‘do you prefer tea or coffee, rice or pasta?)

Food banks are not membership organisations and clients have no say in how they are run nor, in most cases, do they have any voice or opportunity to give their opinions.

1. ***The links between the food industry and food aid***

In addition to the donations given by the general public to food banks, including harvest festival collections in schools, there are important links with the food industry and its disposal of its surplus:

* Many supermarkets allow food aid organisations to place collecting bins in stores so that customers can donate items
* Some also allow twice yearly collections by the charity outside the store
* Some food aid organisations, notably Fareshare, have long collected ‘surplus’ food for distribution to charities (surplus food is that which is still edible but cannot be sold for a variety of reasons)
* Recently, a partnership between Fareshare and the Trussell Trust has made use of the Food Cloud app so that surplus food can more speedily and efficiently be moved from store to charity. This has resulted in more fresh food being available to food charities

The use of surplus food is often seen as a ‘win-win’ scenario for charities, the food industry and the food poor:

* Food aid organisations obtain more food
* The food poor gain access to more food, including (at least in theory) fresh food
* The food industry disposes of its surplus at a relatively low cost
* Food is not ‘wasted’ or sent to landfill, so this system is environmentally friendly
* The food industry also burnishes its brand by fulfilling its Corporate Social Responsibilities (CSR)

***Devolved governments in Scotland and Wales***

The Scottish government has taken a very different tack to that in Westminster and is willing to listen to and act upon the advice of organisations like ‘Menu for Change’. It views the problems of food poverty (and unhealthy food) as a community issue, not just one for those at the bottom of the socio-economic spectrum. The focus is on community and on ‘dignity’.

The Welsh government, in spite of having fewer powers and resources than that of Scotland, has taken a number of measures to address food poverty, for example this summer it announced that it would fund free school meals for children during the school holidays.

There is an embryonic Welsh Food Manifesto.

***The role of the media***

In most of the British print media food poverty (and poverty in general) is rarely handled sympathetically or in any depth. There seems little doubt that this has contributed to a general view that many who use food banks are ‘scroungers’ (a view often taken of those who are forced to have recourse to benefits).

Television has also contributed to this view with programmes on ‘poverty pornography’ like ‘Benefits Street’.

Conversely, the prize-winning film ‘I, Daniel Blake’ treated the subject of poverty, food poverty and food banks with accuracy and sympathy and was well received.

***Conclusion***

It has increasingly become the responsibility of the voluntary sector and the food industry to plug the gaps in the welfare system via the various food aid organisations, including food banks. The risk here is not only the increasing normalisation of this system but also its entrenchment.

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Length of document: 3649 words (of which approx 1000 words are questions posed by Rapporteur)

***Attachments:***

1) 2016. ‘Big Society or Broken Society? Food Banks in the UK’. *Anthropology Today* 32, 1, 5-9.

2) 2017. ‘Win-win? Food poverty, food aid and food surplus in the UK today’. *Anthropology Today*, June 2017, pp. 17-22.