On the right track?
Making connections between food, social justice and health inequalities

community food and health
(scotland)

CFHS networking conference 2012
Key themes from the table discussions

About CFHS

Community Food and Health (Scotland) aims to ensure that everyone in Scotland has the opportunity, ability and confidence to access a healthy and acceptable diet for themselves, their families and their communities. We do this by supporting work with and within low-income communities that addresses health inequalities and barriers to healthy and affordable food.

Barriers being addresses by community-based initiatives are:

Availability – increasing access to fruit and vegetables of an acceptable quality and cost
Affordability – tackling not only the cost of shopping but also getting to the shops
Skills – improving confidence and skills in cooking and shopping
Culture – overcoming ingrained habits

Through our work we aim to support communities to
- Identify barriers to a healthy balanced diet
- Develop local responses to addressing these barriers, and
- Highlight where actions at other levels, or in other sectors are required.

We value the experience, understanding, skills and knowledge within Scotland's community food initiatives and their unique contribution to developing and delivering policy and practice at all levels.

Background

In July 2012, CFHS invited some organisations with a wide range of roles in relation to food, health, anti-poverty and policy development to share their thinking on approaches to address increasing food poverty: these included Carnegie Trust UK, Oxfam, the Scottish Government, NHS Health Scotland, Healthy Valleys, Lanarkshire Community Food and Health Partnership, and Edinburgh Cyrenians.

Everyone had a shared concern about reports of increasing food poverty and demand for emergency food assistance and how we respond in practical ways that are progressive and build on holistic approaches.

In November 2012 at our annual networking conference we invited participants to share their insight into:

- what it is like in communities where there are signs that people are experiencing food poverty; and to
- discuss and share existing and potential approaches to food and health policy and practice that address difficulties in accessing food, and food poverty within low-income communities in Scotland.

Our invited speaker, Dr. Deirdre O'Connor, School of Agriculture and Food Science, University College Dublin, kicked off the discussion around a paper on 'Rights based approaches to addressing food poverty and food insecurity in Ireland and the UK' co-authored with Dr. Liz Dowler, University of Warwick. Food poverty indicators have been recently developed in Ireland. The conference was also an ideal opportunity for Deirdre to give an insight into how food poverty is being considered in Ireland as similar indicators relating to Scotland are not available as yet. For more information on indicators developed in Ireland, *safe*food (the promotional body responsible for food safety and healthy eating on the island of Ireland), has published a briefing document based on research commissioned by the Irish government's Department of Social Protection.

You can download Deirdre's presentation here.

The reports on how food poverty indicators have been developed in Ireland are available here 'Measuring food poverty in Ireland: Developing a food poverty indicator' *safefood* (Ireland), and 'Constructing a Food Poverty Indicator for Ireland using the Survey on Income and Living Conditions

The following report is a note of key themes and points gathered from what participants said during the conference discussion in responses to the three questions they were given:

1. Listening to the speaker – has anything occurred to you about what has been said?
2. Do you think you are seeing food poverty in your communities (communities you are in contact with through your work)?
3. What is your community doing or thinking of doing to address food poverty?

Listening to the speaker – has anything occurred to you about what has been said?

Rights-based approach to food poverty and food security

A rights-based approach is valid along with other community level responses. Participants felt that Scotland is seen as a rich country and should have the ability to provide for others who are finding it difficult to provide for themselves. Having a 'two pronged' approach to addressing food poverty is essential.

Many participants reported their lack of awareness to rights-based approaches, especially in relation to food and felt this issue needed to be highlighted and discussed in open forums.

However, an important question remained from this discussion - where does responsibility begin? Communities are taking on roles to address need and fill gaps where needed, but to what extent should their role be?

Policy

Engagement with and influencing policy

Engagement with policy and policy making is not perceived as everyone's role. Some participants are more focused on delivering activity rather than engaging in policy.

Some groups are trying to influence policy through local delivery, but their perception is that policy development is driven by top-down approaches. There is also a perceived lack of engagement from the top with what is happening on the ground and an inability to influence policy at national level.

> *"Deeper or improved understanding of grassroots is required."*

Others believe that downstream (bottom up) approaches can influence policy more if given the opportunity, but in reality many are mainly concerned with lack of funding and delivering responses to food inequality/poverty on a shoestring - more focused on what can be done locally.

> *"Accessing food needs more investment from government to support local action looking closely at cause and effect, especially for those in crisis."*

Food policy

Community food organisations frequently highlight their concerns that a national food and drink policy for Scotland has led to tensions between consumers, the food industry, and food and health. Concerns raised at the table discussion were no different. Conflicts of interest at local and national level were discussed in relation to

the food industry, economics, advertising, availability of unhealthy foods, licensing of take-away outlets, and access and affordability. Could state intervention be used to legislate towards availability and pricing of healthy foods?

> *"The food industry and the Scottish Government are pushing food exports for 'economic growth."*

Some participants raised these issues throughout the discussion and were concerned that food poverty and food distribution were not being perceived as a high enough priority.

Some participants felt that the existence of food poverty needs to be acknowledged more openly. This discussion focused on highlighting over-reliance on individual responsibility – shaping policies and approaches that address the issue is a two-way process. People would like to see more upstream (top down) responses and approaches and better links with what is happening downstream. Participants can **support** and provide intelligence to CFHS to make the links.

It was also mentioned that other conflicting voices were in competition, eg. climate change and food waste.

Access to food/inequalities

Access to food, in particular fresh fruit and vegetables and healthier choices, has long been acknowledged as a having an impact on health inequalities. Participants said that those experiencing food poverty were doubly impacted through their inability to access food, as well as being unable to choose healthy food items to consume. This also stigmatised individuals and families, an experience that can often be hidden in relation to food access. There are also many myths that stigmatise people, and need to be disproved, such as the ability to afford mobile phones, or take aways, etc. Are such myths evidence-based?

For many the experience of food poverty was not new, with poor food and/or nutritional choices often being the norm. It was also acknowledged that the cost of utilities and fuel has a major impact on ability to purchase food, as well as cook and prepare it. Some low-income households are further impacted unequally by having to pay higher costs for fuel due to relying on meter cards to receive fuel supplies (the cost of fuel is higher than payment by direct debit or other billing methods). Some people avoid or cannot access cooking facilities, such as a cooker, due to the cost of purchasing and using it.

Food access is further challenged by the economy as food and transport costs rise, adding to the price of food and the cost of getting to shops, or places where there are shops. Where you live has therefore a continued impact on access, especially in rural and island communities, and what is affordable in your area if you cannot travel anywhere else.

Availability and choice

Participants explored perceptions that exist about food access, availability and choice. Are individual choices about food items consumed the main problem in

relation to poor nutrition rather than the availability of food to consume?

Conversations focused on individual and community priorities in relation to food choices and the impact of negative and positive influences at local level and issues of culture, eg. perceptions of West of Scotland attitudes to food.

Where influences are positive it can be a challenge to maintain good practice, as there are wide differences in prices depending on your location. As healthier choices become more expensive, positive eating habits are changing. There were debates on perceptions in practice, eg. it is cheaper to eat unhealthily as high calorie foods are cheaper than low calorie foods; less healthy options make you feel fuller for longer; if you don't have much food, then foods high in fat can be perceived as sustaining you for longer.

A number of issues were raised about retailers, mainly focusing on the impact and influence of big supermarkets on food choices. 'Special offers' are prevalent in all supermarkets, but they are not convenient for everyone depending on the household, food storage facilities and ranges of food 'on offer'. Many 'offers' are for foods high in fat, salt and sugars and not basic items. Participants queried if offers realistically presented value for money if ranges mainly included foods of poor nutritional value.

Do supermarkets shape and influence attitudes? 'Pushing different types of food as they are also dealing with economic challenges' and impacts on their profit margins. Are communities with limited incomes being taken advantage of through high costs of basic and staple food items such as grains, cereals, breads, pulses, fruits and vegetables?

A final point raised was food discarded by supermarkets. Is there enough effort to redistribute food and could more be done?

> "Are they donating/redistributing as much as they can to those that need it?"

Defining food poverty? Increased food poverty? What are the signs?

Some participants felt food poverty was difficult to identify – is it a choice, skills or knowledge issue? Are past perceptions of food poverty the same as current perceptions of food poverty?

Measuring food poverty

Can food poverty in Scotland be tracked, measured and defined to ensure the real picture of experience and scale is recorded? It is important to measure numbers as well as experiences that indicate food poverty.

How would it be measured and and what would indicators look like? (Examples used in Ireland were useful to consider). Examples could be: the ability to afford one hot meal per day or how often a hot meal is afforded; access to cooking facilities; access to shop/affordable foods; not having % spend of income on food; how often breakfast is eaten; and ability to afford a minimum standard of nutrition?

Is increased availability of food parcels an indication of more people in crisis? What are the statistics for Scotland? Does it differ between areas within Scotland and other parts of the UK? Is there hidden poverty? And, there is a need to consider rural areas and impact of poverty.

Many participants felt that having listened to the presentation from Dr Deirdre O'Connor that the situation in Scotland and Ireland appears similar, but are we ahead in Scotland in relation to types of interventions already happening to address food poverty? The following are some examples that participants mentioned:

- Young people receiving benefits – income reducing due to impact of welfare reforms.
- Parent and toddler groups – parents unable to provide a snack for their child at the group.
- Older people, especially in rural communities, with an increase in older people accessing food parcels.
- Women seeking protection from domestic abuse have no money on arrival at refuge (Women's Aid).
- Babies being weaned later to avoid food spend on complementary weaning foods – phrase used "milky babies" which can lead to ill-health and developmental issues.
- Less experimentation with new foods – fear of food being wasted.
- Impact of food poverty on wellbeing and ability to eat with others.
- Young children very vulnerable and have less choice about what is available to them (access to food at school is important).

Do you think you are seeing food poverty in your community (communities you are from and or communities you are in contact with through your work)?

- Impact on women: food budget holders; main source of food organising in home; reducing food intake to feed children first.
- People buying smaller quantities of food or day by day (not always cost-effective).
- People are skipping meals or having fewer meals on a daily/weekly basis.
- Where meals are available in services, people are choosing to buy less.
- Reducing cooking due to increasing energy costs.
- Increase in local food banks/emergency supports from local organisations including church based and private sources.
- Vulnerable groups, eg. people experiencing homelessness accessing more services such as emergency funds to buy food (and associated stigma). Homeless day centre in southeast Glasgow – 25% increase in demand for emergency food parcels.
- Increased referrals to local agencies that can refer on to food banks.
- Increased dependence on other family members.

Impact of welfare reforms

Most tables recorded the welfare reform was having a huge impact and would continue to do so as reforms increase in 2013. The impacts were:

- Increased hardship on individuals.
- Doubts about any real benefits from reforms as increased hardship will increase reliance on **emergency** supports and 'hand outs'.
- If Universal credits are implemented, payments will jump from weekly to monthly payments - too big a step to already challenged recipients.
- Impact on children/child related benefits.
- Housing Benefit reforms will impact across the board from individuals to agencies including housing associations.
- Will money get to people who need it most?
- Benefit assessments causing deep stress and individuals turning to substances to cope – having detrimental effect on wellbeing and support provided.
- Cuts being implemented at the same time as evidence of negative experiences being highlighted about their impact – is the State ignoring these issues?

What is your community doing or thinking of doing to address food poverty?

Responses to addressing food poverty

Any responses need to be real, relevant and direct. Community initiatives are already responding, with many saying they are not aware of perceived responses from public services. Participants commented that any responses also need to tackle 'hybrid approaches' – simultaneously supporting a unique contribution of community-led approaches, while pushing for more effective policies to tackle structural determinants of food poverty, which includes welfare reform.

Practical activities at community level

Existing focus on food access is being maintained but shifting towards addressing food poverty. Approaches include:

Cookery groups with all sections of the community

- With parents and families: focussing on cooking with frozen foods and basic store cupboard ingredients.
- Cookery classes are responding to skills development as well as ensuring food prepared in classes is going home to feed families/individuals for 'dinner' or 'tea'.
- Cooking groups with men/children.
- Bulk cooking – using and freezing leftovers.
- Replicating ready-made meals that people are familiar with.
- Social aspect important to provide and deliver support.

Co-ops

- Some subsidise cost of fruit and vegetables and supply ingredient packs, eg. soup packs.
- Selling fruit and vegetable packs fixed at consistent price, eg. £1.00 – linked with recipe cards and practical cooking classes.

Food parcels/food banks

- Communities responding to increase in emergency situations – short-term and long-term, with a variety of referral and access systems.
- Participants felt that it is important for community groups to respond to need - voluntary agencies key to supply contents of parcels.

Other examples

- Voucher schemes (eg. Little Leithers - Edinburgh Community Food) for fruit, vegetables, fish and meat items.
- Breakfast clubs: parents and other family members attending; essential for very young children.

- Supported food shopping to identify more effective food spend and how to make the most of shopping for better value items.
- Lunch clubs for older people - addressing a range of needs but also reducing individual spend on food and fuel while attending clubs, and other food clubs.
- Community kitchens.
- Credit unions to support budgeting.
- Food redistribution – 'Fare Share' (example Edinburgh Cyrenians)
- Food boxes – some given as emergency food packs in local communities where needed; starting food boxes for Christmas.
- Work in partnership – growing and supplying food between community projects.
- Projects support people to access one hot meal every day and as many days as possible.
- Promotion of Healthy Start to eligible parents.
- Support for men/women leaving prison and living in shelters/temporary accommodation.
- Community food parcels sold at subsidised rates in local community centre.

Community growing movement
- Community growing in all areas increasing.
- Communal spaces for growing.
- Allotments/community gardens – best practice guidance already developed and available.
- Gardens providing food over summer holidays to children when not in school and unable to access school meals.
- Climate Challenge Fund – support to grow food and links to nutrition.

Skills development
It was acknowledged that many individuals need to learn cooking skills to address food access issues – fundamentally any skills will not be effective if people cannot afford the cost of cooking equipment or fuel. Community approaches to developing cooking skills are well documented:

- Programmes to meet gaps and loss of skills previously passed down through generations.
- Developing and embedding skills – budgeting, shopping, reading food labels, cooking, food storage.
- Social dimension.
- Opportunities to put learning to practice.
- Building capacity of staff, eg. training for trainers to sustain knowledge and skills.

Reach
Community and voluntary sector organisations are able to respond with approaches in communities in need, as well as perceived as outside of reach.

Participants mentioned specific organisations already doing this but also asked, *"How do we know the right people are being reached?"*

Resources required to tackle food inequalities and poverty

Upstream support

Participants acknowledged that any responses to address food poverty require government support for downstream responses to be effective both in the short term and the long term. Discussions like this inspire aspirational outcomes for long-term solutions but resources are often short-term. Any intentions towards sustainable solutions are therefore more difficult to achieve.

Inevitably participants discussed the issue of financial insecurity on their sector, which can impact on and reduce effectiveness.

Some participant tables discussed what could be learned from past national responses to food insecurity and more equal distribution of limited food supplies, eg. food production and interventions to grow food and address limited supply during World War II.

Facilities/Resources

Community cooking

Participants discussed the availability/lack of community cooking facilities in community as a resource issue for some, but noted that others are doing the best with what they have or sharing resources across partners. Could access to **school** kitchens in communities address this issue for some?

An American example of 'community restaurants' was mentioned as a model worth exploring and learning from: "John Bon Jovi Soul Kitchen" (www.jbjsoulkitchen.org) where diners donate what they can afford or donate their time to help feed others, to cover the cost of a meal.

Food retail/distribution

- Increase number of rural areas covered by food outlets
- Direct selling arrangements (food from farms and growers to cut out middle man)
- Develop centralised approaches to co-ordinating food resources – policy initiatives needed to address this

Information and knowledge

Sharing information between networks - information on who to turn to when in need available in an accessible format.

Some participants referred to useful papers and publications that are available and if there is any value in revising them for current perspectives on food poverty
'Myths about food and low income' paper (Sustain)
'Making of modern malnutrition' (Suzi Leather) – Caroline Walker Trust Lecture 1996

Future plans

From 1 April 2013 with approval from our funder, the Scottish Government, CFHS will become part of NHS Health Scotland, a Special Health Board with a national remit to reduce health inequalities. Its new corporate strategy, 'A Fairer Healthier Scotland', sets out the role, direction and priorities of NHS Health Scotland for the next five years.

CFHS has worked very closely with NHS Health Scotland, and its predecessor organisations, since we were established in 1996. CFHS will have a continued focus on recurring themes of inequalities, social justice and poverty ensuring our work supports communities to address barriers to access and take up of a healthy diet. The themes from the conference discussion will enable us and others to highlight concerns and actions that contribute towards developing and delivering improved policy and practice at all levels.