

## **Food, nutrition and poverty**

An overview

**Elizabeth Dowler**

I'm a public health nutritionist. That means I have a good solid science background but also quite a lot of social science in my training but I now work in the social and the policy aspects of food in a Department of sociology. So am I a mixed up kid? No. I'm somebody who understands that when you study or research or indeed engage with food and nutrition you need to have a multidisciplinary approach. And I've been very lucky to be able to have that. And I've worked in the global South and I've worked in the rich North. Usually on poverty. So that's where I'm coming from. And what drives me is a desire that to have a food system which is just and fair and where people's access to food and their pleasure in food become as important as saving money on public health or economic value. Though of course both of those are pretty important too.

There's been a huge amount of very exciting research which has been done in the last well 100 years or so really about the components of food and the ways in which nutrients and other aspects of food contribute to individual health, both in deficiency diseases, the role in helping people avoid infection and many other aspects of food and health. And of course most critically, perhaps, from the governments, from government's perspective is the role that the safety of food plays, that there are not toxins and contaminants and other pathogens and things that cause immediate harm in the food people eat and government's care about that because they don't want their populations getting suddenly sick or dying and they particularly don't want their food system to be under economic jeopardy because it's been shown to be causing very severe ill-health like that. So a lot of attention is focused on food safety, probably rightly.

There's a lot of very exciting research that goes on now about different nutrients and components of nutrients at the, metabolic cellular level and the interactions between that and the human genome for example. So some really kind of sexy stuff going on, on epigenetics and the, the connections between micronutrients and very small components of the food system, of food that you eat and the ways in which your genetic make-up is expressed. And that doesn't just happen in, in the cell in, in the fetus it also happens throughout your life.

People are beginning to understand much more detail about this relationship between particular syndromes, something like type II diabetes or metabolic syndrome, or osteoarthritis say and the role that diet plays both in causing those but also in helping prevent and helping people who have those conditions live with them better and even if not actually cure, that's not quite a word we here so often. And what that means is that there are particular foods that are being manufactured, produced, engineered that meet particular conditions that certain people have. And as I say a lot of money is going into that and a lot of intellectual endeavour. Its real cutting edge stuff.

That isn't actually where I work, not but because I'm not interested in that but because I'm interested in the bigger picture and perhaps slightly different model of food and

health but also because I want to ask questions about that kind of research such as who gains, where's the gain coming, the economic gain and the personal gain. Erm it's terrific as I say, it's very intellectually and possibly an economically and politically exciting, but I also want to ask well actually many of the people in the world who are developing diabetes, as an example, many of the people in the world who are obese erm are actually poorer people and if you're really interested in malnutrition, which includes obesity quite often, people who are obese often have very poor micronutrient status in their bodies, then I wouldn't a lot of those people are poorer, they don't have a lot of money so are they going to be able to afford these kinds of foods because they are often more expensive and also there are people who, its a generalization, but they're often overlooked politically. Maybe they don't vote, maybe they're the wrong tribe, maybe they're the wrong part of the country, they don't have much say.

There is also growing evidence from epidemiology and other, other kinds of science erm that actually it isn't just the nutritional components that link to health but also how you eat. The patterns that you, of foods that you put together. Eating meals if you like. And what time you eat those meals, what stage of the day erm those all link to health too. And they also have a different effect at different stages of the life course.

But people, by and large, unless they're destitute, people choose the food they do because it tells you something about them, it's, about their identity, who they belong to, who their family, friends, kins are. And food is also about hospitality and pleasure and celebration. So when a friend comes you offer them drink or something to eat. Erm if a very important person comes to your village, comes to your street, what we do? We have celebratory meal. And so on. I don't need to spell it out further. So what food means to people is not just about avoiding disease. It's very much about commonsensality is the sort of fancy word for it, about pleasure, well-being and sharing.

And for some people who, if you ask that question, and, as I did a few years ago in the UK in fact, talking to people who were getting more involved with local production, meeting local producers through community supported agricultural, or farmers markets or box schemes or something like that, these are not just in the UK of course. And what they, people said then was that to me health is about the well-being of the local area and erm that we have a good economy that includes lots of people. Maybe we're not all rich but we all have more than enough and we share what we have. So I think that's a really interesting finding not just from research i've been involved in but that other people have done as well. How much that sense of a local livelihood is important to people. Erm food can often be a means of bringing people together and building a local economy. And it's a kind of social glue if you like, perhaps not a very good metaphor for food but not a bad one but it also enables people to express a concern about their local physical and natural environment. They care about soil, they care about water, they care about animal welfare erm, and they also care about future generations. And so by being involved in food some way or another erm even if it's only buying, preparing cooking and eating it, people can express that much bigger sense of health which matters very much.

### *Part 1. Beyond a scientific, reductionist biomedical approach*

So already we've moved on from this rather scientific, reductionist biomedical approach to food and health to this rather bigger picture. And just I think that also illustrates one of the things that a lot of the people who work on the sociology of health would often argue erm the challenge if you like to the biomedical model of health, that by reducing it down to small component, reducing health and the body down to small components, we're missing the bigger picture. And we're missing what it is that enables people to feel good, to feel healthy, to feel their lives worth living, they have a contribution to make.

And it also of course by making it difficult, making it overly scientific, making it too professionalized, we not only take power knowledge away from people, we take away erm the collective power, the economic power. The power to control who grows what, power over seeds, being able to exchange seeds, exchange recipes, know how food works. And that power increasingly in the biomedical and highly scientific model increasingly resides in distant transnational corporations who are not accountable to voters, not accountable to anyone but their shareholders.

And of course also you find that quite, the link to bio-medicine is not accidental. You find quite a lot of pharmaceutical companies, which also food companies and they control huge amounts of the food system and they also control quite a lot of advertising which comes along and says "don't worry about fresh fruits and vegetables they are very difficult to grow and they go off and you are not very good at cooking them why don't you buy this fancy stuff we've made with all these special nutrients in just good for you".

So I'm a bit suspicious about all this push to have everything highly scientific and highly medicalised and I want a bit more openness in that system.

I think what is now becoming much more apparent is the way in which food and nutrition play an important part in inequalities in health. So actually many of the outcomes, health outcomes, are much worse in people who are poorer. Whether that poverty is defined by not having enough material goods, er not having enough income, erm not owning land not owing a boat if you're a fisher person, not having large flocks. Quite often in the European countries we don't have consistent measurements across different countries of income. It's quite hard to interpret those data. So people often use things like years in education, which is not a bad proxy for er, wealth and, and income. Interestingly we don't very often look at food and nutrition by wealth. We tend to do it by immediate things like income. And that's what I want to go on to talk a bit about now.

## *Part 2. Links between food, nutrition and poverty*

The relationship between food and nutrition and poverty. Again you might think this is very obvious. If you're poorer you're not going to have as much money to buy nice food. Yeah that's pretty true. Erm of course it's a much more complicated story than that and there are a couple of things I particularly want to draw out. One, the first, is the way in which nutrition, in particular, nutritional components have quite a history, about 100 years now, of being used to define poverty lines. Now you might think that that's very good strategy. Food is a basic need if you were to work out a sort of least cost diet, what's the minimum amount of money you need to buy the most basic food you need to survive, surely that's a useful thing to know. Up to a point. It is a useful thing to know. The problem is how it is put into practice. And this has been a problem throughout the whole of the 20th century and I see no signs of it changing in the 21<sup>st</sup>, unfortunately.

There is a lot of discussion in academic circles and in policy circles about how to define food poverty. Be nice if there was more opportunity for people who are living in food poverty to have a voice in that. But the kinds of definitions that are being used at the moment are “food poverty is the inability to consume an adequate quality or sufficient quantity of food that is useful for health in socially acceptable ways, or the uncertainty that one will be able to do so”. That links strongly to definitions of household food insecurity and it is partly about dignity, about being able to behave like everybody else. Much more kind of economic approach is “households who have to spend more than 10% of their income to obtain the food they need”.

There is also somewhat descriptive account of what food poverty is like. That it's “the worst diet, worst access, worse health, higher percent of income on food and less choice from a restricted range”. That kind of sums it all up really.

So the important thing about these debates and these definitions is that they give some quantification to how many people living in these conditions and, one would hope, point towards some of the drivers. Why are people falling into these conditions. To do with crises of income, because of loss of job, or because of loss of Social Security, or long-term indebtedness, or some other problem that's hit a household.

If you go back to, to, to nutritional standards and try and kind of turn nutritional standards into a diet, into a food pattern for a different household sizes for a week say, what you often end up with is something which doesn't look like a diet that anybody would want to eat. And probably in its extreme version it's a diet that even if you gave it to prisoners who had no choice they would revolt. They would say I'm not eating the same tedious stuff day after day after day. And that's because human beings are creatures of variety. Even the poorest societies, some of the places that I've worked in and visited, places like Rwanda, or even parts of Mali, where people, some of the households I was visiting had very few of the world's goods, they were pretty poor people, but very hospitable, very welcoming. To an outsider's eye their diet looked very monotonous, but when they talked about it you realised that although they didn't have very many different things they made lots of different dishes with them. And what they looked for was variety from day-to-day. Even in the ways in which they prepared things, the spices they added, the vegetables etc etc. So variety is very important.

So a least cost diet is quite hard to put variety in. But even if you do that and there are some very heroic attempts to do that in a number of countries what then do you use as the costs. Well, quite often, unsurprisingly, people tend to choose the cheapest versions of all the foods they can get hold of. That's a sensible thing to do if you're trying to find a kind of basic rock bottom, minimum. That's may be logical but it isn't very practical because quite often poorest people can't get to the shops or the markets that have those very poorest prices. Or if they can quality is not very good.

And then the third problematic of doing this least cost diet is what part, what proportion of income gets spent on food. And the people who are doing such calculations sometimes use national datasets in order to work out what proportion of income is spent on food and then having calculated how much money you need to meet these basic, they sort of scale it up. Which is all fine and dandy but they don't very often look at what the poorest people spend on food. They often take an average or the bottom 20%, which is not the

poorest people, so therefore they're using a percentage of income spent on food which is often lower than the poorest people do. And the consequence of that is the scaling up gets it wrong, and doesn't scale it up far enough to enable people, really to buy the things, not only food, but the other things they have to pay like rent, like tax, like the fuel if they pay for fuel, or water, if they pay for water, as increasing numbers do all over the world.

So what you find in places whether these kinds of minimum living standards, poverty lines, whatever they are, they actually misrepresent the realities for poorer people. And there are many other aspects of that misrepresentation that I haven't had time to go into. But the food ones I've just given you a glimmer for. And they often have very little in them to allow for even things like a birthday party or celebrating an important festival.

Not only is the consequence of people are then blamed for not being able to budget by food shop and cook properly, although very often extremely good at doing that, but they are also told if you can't do this properly then on your own head be it. So they are left responsible in both senses, culpability and having to do something about it. And this is such a familiar, depressing tale. In my own country the UK, it has a long history. If you look at the very basic costs of living which got translated after the Second World War into the, erm, the welfare benefits. They wished, you could show then, I can show you now, over 60 years 70 years, that they are not enough people to be able to eat healthily. But my voices and that of other people who do the same thing is not heard because the answer is this has been calculated scientifically and therefore it's okay. And it is not just in the UK where that happens too its but it's pretty universal.

The consequence is that people's food intake suffers even more and there is a lot of evidence of this. Research I did some years ago er, working, looking at what lone parents were eating in London, time and again I came across people who were the most inventive and creative cooks, could sort of make a meal out of more or less nothing, there was certainly very little in the cupboards but they could conjure up a meal but, because I was measuring their diets, I can tell however creative and however hard they worked, to protect themselves and their children from the consequences of not having enough money their diet was woefully short on micronutrients. There was no way they had enough money to be able to meet healthy diet requirements and erm so their health would continue to suffer.

And there's a lot of evidence now, some recent work out for example from the Institute for development studies and Oxfam, which has been done in a number of countries over the last couple of years, as economic recession has really plagued many, many economies - fall out of the bank crisis in 2007 and the collapse of the US sub-prime market, and that's had an incredible knock-on effect in many, many countries. And so this study that I just referring to from Oxfam and institute for development studies, they went and looked at how people managed as their incomes are falling, they were losing their jobs, public sector cuts, etc stagnant wages and of course rising food prices which I'll mention again a minute, as they, how did they manage with all of that? Well they cut back, they borrowed from their friends, they sent the children somewhere else to be fed, and they are the dug into all their stores, they sold things and time again, they managed food by eking it out. Food is, if you like, what people can cut back on because often you can't renegotiate your rent or your bills or your taxes you don't have any choice about

those but you can if necessary live on a very basic diet for some time. So you stave off hunger or stave starvation in the extremes but actually you are really suffering, your health is going down, you're more likely to be anaemic, you're more likely to be extremely tired, you don't work well, your children can't study, all of these consequences are difficult to capture in surveys. They're difficult to put a price on either for the country as a whole, the economy as a whole or for the individuals, they just know they feel pretty miserable, and that's a consequence of getting this measure wrong. It's a very severe one on individuals.

### *Part 3. Rising inequality and health*

Now there is a lot of literature about rising inequality at the moment globally and in a number of countries. And there is a lot of anxiety and a great deal of energetic work on inequalities in health. Through the Marmot commission. WHO and so on. Those two of course linked together very strongly. But not many people are talking about rising inequalities in food access or food consumption and yet in country after country if you look at national surveys you've always been able to see that poorer people eat less well. They have far fewer micronutrients, they have a much less diverse food base, and in some cases much lower calorie intakes. Although as I say when people have to come back, cut back, what they do is try and avoid hunger which tends to mean the people shop for calories.

So the drive to, to sell food cheaply is a very powerful one and essential when you have all these low wages. And I don't have a magic answer to that, except that it's, it's a condition, which cannot continue indefinitely and there are a number of reasons that. One of them is that the food system itself, the food sector, is a major source of poor contracts, insecure livelihoods, low wages, lots of unskilled people. So many of the people who are being impoverished in the world by current forces, actually work in the food sector, which seems a bit of an irony.

And secondly one of the critical issues is that few governments seem really to be grasping the food element of this inequality even in richer countries. I may even say especially in richer countries. It's assumed that food aid is needed elsewhere. But what we're seeing now is in more and more countries, right across Europe, other parts of the world, people are turning to charitable food in order to be able to survive. And sometimes government say well this is great, this is erm you know, this is very good social engagement. We like to see people helping their neighbours, of course I'd be the last to decry that, but it doesn't seem to me entirely just, a moral way of going on that we say so many of our fellow citizens in country after country, cannot make enough money to live on, or have been so hopelessly unemployed, with no prospect of work, which seems to be the case for growing numbers of young people, that they have to rely on charitable handouts from their neighbours. This doesn't seem to be a good structure on which to build a 21st-century society.

For all sorts of reasons, not least that it's the experience, such as it is documented, is that it's quite demeaning for people to have to go and ask for help, ask the charity and, and secondly you have any choice about which you get and whatever else we can say about the food system, it's premised on consumer choice. So this is the end of consumer choice. But more seriously, it, it isn't an answer, it isn't even adequate sticking plaster, it's certainly not looking at the fundamental needs that there. There are countries like

United States of America and Canada, which have a long history of food banks and food pantries and food, food systems of help from concerned neighbours. And what we've seen there, in parallels, this is very widely documented by academics and campaigners and others, is rolling back of state responsibility. So, whatever social protection was in place, part of the social welfare system that has been diminished or been inadequate.

It is not entirely true United States, so the food stamps system which has now become a special nutrition action programme, there's nutrition in there again, erm actually has been shown to do some good. It is not enough, there are inadequacies, but it's much more effective than pure charitable aid. That's quite a hard lesson for people to learn because those who are volunteering, and it is mostly volunteering in the charitable food systems, work very hard to make sure people have enough. And they don't want to be told that this isn't solving the problem. They want to be told this is great. And so it is in some ways. I think what it demonstrates is how much people do care about their communities and they also care very much that people should have enough to eat. And that seems to be such a fundamental human driver I think we lose sight of that in state responsibilities and at our peril.

So what is this about rising food prices and why did, why was it they went up. There's a lot of literature about this, and a lot of argument part of it is because of a major droughts, Australia and the US and other key erm cereal producing areas, those were kind of fairly immediate effects, there is also erm these longer running things that I mentioned about loss of biodiversity, anxieties about the food system. Some people argue that it's because of rising demand for meat among growing middle classes in South, southern parts of the world, and meat increasingly is not grass fed but cereal fed, so you can see that connection. There'd a big, the same on cereals, there'd been a big EU directive pushing towards using cereals for biofuels, and some argued that that also contributed to rising commodity prices. There's quite a lot of evidence that, if not the initial increase, but subsequent volatility has been sustained by commodity speculation on the hedge fund market, linked to the collapse in sub-prime erm back in 2007. These are all big picture stuff plus of course rising price of oil. That's always been a big driver of food costs. Whatever the reasons those increases in food prices and they have been extraordinarily dramatic over the last oh six years I suppose now, maybe seven. And they have had profound effects in many parts of the world.

#### *Part 4. Local action and policy change*

There are also positive things that are happening at the moment some of them very widely supported by policy responses. And that is picking up some of the things that I been alluding to in my talk, which is about local action. Again sometimes voluntarily. Volunteer led. Volunteer driven. Volunteer effort all time not always because even volunteers need to be able to eat. They need a livelihood. So we have to get that balance right and a lot of local level activity is not volunteers, it is about local producers and processors coming together. And there are a number of parts of the world where those kinds of local activities are somehow enabled or being enabled to survive. And there is growing evidence that when people can come together in small-scale activities often around food having a bit of money on a short-term loan, through some kind of a community loan system, to be able to have er, er small land, small land, animals goats and chickens or something like that, or to have be able to and set up a particular sort of

vegetable plot, to do some cooking and be able to sell the produce, small enterprises of one kind and another. These are spreading in Europe, in North and South America and in many other parts of the world as well. And where those things come together, what people find is that even those who previously had no connection into food other than just going to visit the shop and buying the stuff, bringing it home or even ordering it online and having it delivered, find themselves being reconnected with, as I was saying earlier, soils, biodiversity, the natural world, animals and relishing variety.

Now nobody is suggesting that we we're, going, that, that communities, that countries are going to be able to the feed themselves and feed themselves healthily and nutritionally out of small local enterprises. Actually, there are some people who are arguing that but the majority, don't see that it, for that. What they see is firstly this supplements the basics and this gets us away from cheap food scenario were all cheap food is about as calories. This is about richness of diet, nutrition and health richness and truthfulness and transparency and openness and understanding and reconnection. It is also about tooling people up so that they are more resilient communities. So that they can withstand whatever the forces of impoverishment are that are coming their way.

And I think those kinds of activities are very exciting. I've done research on them myself and even just visiting you know a small community supported agriculture scheme in, in a slightly forgotten part of the country and hearing people talk about why they give up time to come and help with the weeding, help with the harvesting, how much they care about the quality of the soil or how much they care about the well-being of the animals that are in this community supported agriculture not only for themselves not only for their current community but also the future community, for their children and their grandchildren. That they feel they got something to hand on, a natural environment and a social environment as well as a good economic environment which is local, and which is transparent, in which they have some kind of say.

A few years ago, erm, the Food Ethics Council, which is a small charity of which I'm a member, had a very interesting process an inquiry into food and fairness and we had 14 members of the panel who represented quite a mixture of people who are involved in the food system. So there were a couple of academics like me, but there are also people who work in industry, who worked in actual that large, large companies but also representing across the retail consortium and, and the food industrial sector. We also had erm people, a couple of people from think tanks and quangos, such as the gang masters licensing authority, in Chatham house, and we have people from campaigning organisations, and a couple of producers. And it was a really interesting experience for those people to think about what fairness might look like in the food system.

The focus, because of our funding, was the UK food system but because in the UK we the world as you might say so we were not just looking at UK issues at all.

And we has a very explicit ethical framework which interestingly emerged during the process. I wasn't primarily involved in the drafting of the final report er but it is framed around

fair shares, which is about equality of outcomes. So you are looking at the distribution of well-being. The fact that poorer people have worse diets, worse nutrition. Fair play, which is about equality of opportunity. Looking at the access to the means of bringing



about those outcomes. That people are decently paid and have decent jobs. And fair say, which is about autonomy and voice.

And we used that framing, fair shares, fair play, fair say, to look at food security, sustainability and public health. Those are all the issues I've been talking about. It was a really interesting, challenging experience and quite a comprehensive report fully referenced, available on the web, of course. And even though it was done a few years ago the messages that are in it are still applicable today.

Cheap food is no longer a reasonable, possible policy option. We need to put social justice at the heart of the food system. Poorer farmers need a voice, poorer producers need a voice, poorer consumers need a voice, and we need mechanisms to enable that to happen. And we need food to be produced, processed, distributed, purchased in a system, which is sustainable economically, socially and environmentally. And which above all is just. Those are the things that drive me and I hope those things that can drive you in the future.