Geoforum 74 (2016) 213–221

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Geoforum

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/geoforum

Beyond food provision: Understanding community growing in the context of food poverty

Roberta Sonnino *, Owain Hanmer

School of Geography and Planning, Cardiff University, Glamorgan Building, King Edward VII Avenue, Cardiff CF10 3WA, Wales, UK

1. Introduction

In the last decade, rising food and fuel prices in the context of a persistent economic crisis have redefined the geography of hunger. Once regarded as a concern confined to the global South, hunger has now emerged as a social and political issue also in wealthy countries (Dowler and Lambie-Mumford, 2015a). In Europe, in particular, a devastating combination of recession, austerity measures and social welfare reforms has dramatically increased the number of people accessing emergency food aid. In the UK, for example, in 2014–15 The Trussell Trust (2015) distributed emergency food to over 1 million people.

Academics have widely focused on the origins and evolutionary nature of the current food crisis, which is considered to mark the end of a perceived era of luxury in the global North and the start of a period of destabilization (Marsden and Morley, 2014). Experts have identified a range of proximate factors behind the crisis, including the diversion of agriculture to biofuels, increasing demand from prospering countries, rising oil prices and financial speculation (Headey and Fan, 2010; Morgan and Sonnino, 2010; Bailey, 2011). Attention has been paid also to the structural causes of the global food crisis, with studies pointing in particular to governance gaps and an ever-increasing corporate control of the agri-food system (Carolan, 2012; McKeon, 2015).

In mainstream policy discourses of wealthy countries, the concept of "food poverty" has become especially prominent to refer to the outcomes of this crisis. Defined as "the inability to afford, or to have access to, food to make up a healthy diet" (UK Department of Health, 2005: 7), "food poverty" has traditionally been framed as a household problem, linked to "underlying cultural practices that reflect 'human inefficiencies' in budgeting, food purchasing, preparation and cooking skills" (Midgley, 2012: 301). In the UK, for example, food poverty has been the focus of a recent Parliamentary Inquiry (Field et al., 2014), which concluded that rising food prices have increased the proportion of household income spent on food and that households in the lowest income group are consuming less healthy foods (such as fruit and vegetables) and more processed products.

For academics, one important implication of this policy narrative has been a shift in the attribution of responsibility from the State to the individual. Conceptualizing food poverty as an outcome of lack of responsibility or lack of knowledge at the individual/household level frees governments from the onus of addressing the structural causes of the crisis. Indeed, in many wealthy countries the main response to rising food poverty levels has been the formalization, facilitation and coordination at the national level of food banks – a form of emergency food provision that is generally run by churches, community groups and charities (Downing and Kennedy, 2014; Lambie-Mumford, 2015).

The literature is increasingly challenging the widespread social and political acceptance of food banks, on two main grounds. On the one hand, they are found to be limited in their ability to provide a healthy and nutritious diet (Poppendieck, 2014). On the other, food banks are often seen as a mechanism that has evolved to fill the gaps created by "the welfare state's deterioration in assuring adequate health and social security for its citizens" (Tarasuk et al., 2014: 1414). Food banks, it has been argued, are an inadequate measure of food poverty – a problem that is experienced and managed differently by different people (Lambie-Mumford, 2015).

As Maslen et al. (2013: 4) explain, "food poverty is complex and multi-faceted. It is not simply about immediate hunger and how that might be alleviated. It is not just about the quantity of food that is eaten, but involves the dietary choices, the cultural norms and the physical and financial resources that affect which foods are eaten, ultimately impacting on health status". Food poverty, in other words, sits in a relational context of multiple deprivations. It is the product of the interplay between a range of financial but also social, cultural and political relations (Midgley, 2012; Caraher and Dowler, 2014). As such, food poverty requires creative responses that involve different actors at different levels.

This paper aims to enhance theoretical and practical understanding of food poverty through a focus on community gardening, which provides a rich historic connection with issues of food access in times of crisis (as evidenced, for example, by the long history of allotments in countries such as the USA and the UK – see Foley, 2014). To date, much has been written on the health and social benefits of growing initiatives in cities (see, for example, Rishbeth, 2005; Carney et al., 2012; Milbourne, 2012; Green and Phillips, 2013). As yet, however, such benefits have never been

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: SonninoR@cf.ac.uk (R. Sonnino).

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2016.06.011
0016-7185/© 2016 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

discussed in relation to the alleged limitations of the food bank model and, more widely, to the challenges of food poverty.

To understand the capacity of community food growing to address the relational nature of food poverty and ultimately contribute to its alleviation we focused on a deprived area of South Wales, a region of the UK that has been hit especially hard by the recent food crisis. Our analysis of four community-growing initiatives shows that these projects do not necessarily develop in ideological opposition to (and spatial separation from) more institutionalized forms of food aid – i.e., the food bank model. In Wales, food-growing initiatives are "community hubs" that mobilize progressive alliances between civil society organizations and governmental agencies in the fight against the multiple deprivations that shape food poverty. As we conclude, theoretically as well as practically, these findings highlight the need for a much more nuanced and place-based approach to the challenges of food poverty.

2. Addressing food poverty: from food banks to community growing

The food price crisis of 2008 has revamped academic debates about the food system. Theorizations of a "New Food Equation" (Morgan and Sonnino, 2010), the "New Fundamentals" (Lang, 2010) and a "new geography of food security" (Sonnino, 2016) have attracted attention to the coincident dysfunction of environmental and health systems, which is deemed to be responsible for creating or enhancing multiple forms of socio-economic and environmental vulnerabilities in the food system (McMichael, 2009; Sage, 2013). Recent literature points in particular to persistent trends of food price volatility, rising malnutrition, social unrest and loss of biodiversity as indicators of a global food security crisis that, thus far, has been analyzed primarily through spatially aggregated and quantum arguments around demand and supply factors (Sonnino et al., 2014).

An emerging body of literature is raising the need to complement these macro-level discussions about food insecurity with a focus on individual experiences of the problem. Challenging the supply-side and global concerns embodied in mainstream food security discourse, some researchers raise the need for an increased analytic focus on the most immediate issues that constrain individual access to nutritious food. As Dowler and Lambie-Mumford (2015b: 418) explain, "food security [...] encompasses the need for sustainable and sufficiently secure livelihoods or other sources of income which provide enough money to afford the food needed to meet health and social necessities". In this context, academics have begun to borrow the notion of "food poverty" from the policy arena to refer to the 'problem' that leads to people accessing emergency food providers (Lambie-Mumford, 2015), calling for research that enhances conceptual understanding of food poverty through a focus on its relational context – i.e., the multiple deprivations that are created by the interplay between wider social, political and cultural dynamics (Midgley, 2012; Caraher and Dowler, 2014). To date, however, the literature has focused mostly on the solutions adopted to alleviate the problem of food poverty within the social policy realm (see, for example, Perry et al., 2014; Cooper et al., 2014; Field et al., 2014).

In this context, food banks have become the main target of academic criticism – as a quintessential example (despite their best intentions) of the reductive understanding of food poverty that seems to guide political action. In recent years, scholars have raised concern about the contribution of food banks to a healthy and nutritious diet (Poppendieck, 2014) as well as their capacity to meet growing demand in the medium and long-term (Lambie-Mumford et al., 2014). More broadly, academic criticism of food banks has concentrated on the very nature of a model that constructs hunger as a matter of charity, rather than as a structural issue (Riches, 2011). In addition to stigmatizing their claimants, the food bank model is accused of reducing and cementing government's action at the household and individual levels (Dowler and Lambie-Mumford, 2015b). As Dowler and Lambie-Mumford (2015a) highlight, the failure of a political response is partly due to a lack of clarity as to who is responsible for tackling an issue which is essentially cross-sectoral, with few coordinating mechanisms currently in existance. In some cases, this void has reinforced the privatization of the food sector, with corporations exploiting the food poverty problem through donations that offer tax concessions and improve their public image (Booth and Whelan, 2014).

Evidence from Canada (Tarasuk et al., 2014) and Australia (Booth and Whelan, 2014) seems to show that what was meant to be a short-term solution to the food poverty crisis is becoming an entrenched mechanism. In other words, there is a blurring of boundaries between the welfare state and the emerging charity food systems in terms of roles and responsibilities. By shifting the focus away from crucial questions about structural inequalities (Lambie, 2011), food banks perpetuate a model that tackles the symptoms of food poverty, rather than its underlying causes (Bull and Harries, 2013).

Alongside studies that criticize the food bank model for depoliticizing the responsibility of the State to take ownership of the food poverty crisis sits another (and largely unrelated) body of literature that focuses on alternative strategies against food poverty. Examples include social supermarkets, which help people on low-income to buy food at a reduced price (Downing and Kennedy, 2014), and wider food distribution networks such as The Matthew Tree Project in Bristol – a registered charity that aims to provide a 'wrap around' range of support and guidance services to crisis hit members of society. The project has developed a Food Plus model based upon intervention from crisis point to full restoration, working in collaboration with different partners to help tackle the structural causes of food poverty (The Matthew Tree Project, 2016).

In the context of research on potential alternative solutions to the food poverty crisis, urban agriculture is becoming a prominent and rapidly expanding field of research, given its widespread use as a pro-poor planning tool to tackle urban hunger and improve livelihoods (Dubbeling et al., 2010). Historically, most research in this area has taken place in the global South, where food growing is often a key livelihood strategy for urban dwellers (Redwood, 2009). The literature on industrialized countries has focused mostly on "gardens" and "allotments" – terms that emphasize the leisure dimension of food growing activities in modern wealthy cities (Pinkerton and Hopkins, 2009; McKay, 2011; Foley, 2014). In reality, however, as Foley (2014) declares, gardens and allotments have not always been for pleasure. During times of crisis (such as World War II, the Great Depression in the USA, or in contemporary decaying Detroit), allotments have become important practical and symbolic spaces in a fight for sustenance (Tornaghi, 2014; Okvat and Zautra, 2011) – the vital lifeline for the poor, or, as Foley (2014) contends, the difference between independence and the destitution of the workhouse. Gardens and allotments, in short, carry a long history of political battles for land, a story of greed and power, hunger, protest and the struggle for a fairer society (Foley, 2014).

Today, the food crisis is giving prominence to urban agriculture also in the global North, where a multiplicity of different actors (including community organizations, local councils, universities and charities) are organizing food growing initiatives as a tool to address food rights, individual and communal health, urban environmental quality and socio-environmental justice (Dubbeling et al., 2010; Tornaghi, 2014). In this process, urban food spaces

Download English Version:

https://daneshyari.com/en/article/5073457

Download Persian Version:

https://daneshyari.com/article/5073457

Daneshyari.com