



## **Problematizing the Emergence of Household Food Security in England**

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**Abstract.** Household food security is a term associated with social welfare and the distribution of resources within society. It is also an organizing metaphor that is highly political and context dependent in its construction and deployment. How the concept emerges into new situations is often overlooked. This article problematizes the recent emergence of household food security in England, a feature closely linked to the food policy developments of the UK Government (2007–2010). I explore household food security in England through a discourse analysis of published policy texts and semi-structured interviews with third-sector practitioners. These reveal the tensions surrounding the introduction of household food security into this domestic policy setting. I show how policymakers used the concept strategically, and how the discursive and institutional legacies of food poverty and the welfare state constrained the wider adoption of household food security in this contemporary setting.

### **Introduction**

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations states that: ‘Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life. Household food security is the application of this concept to the family level, with individuals within households as the focus of concern’ (FAO, 2009, p. 8). This definition has evolved over time and has come to represent a powerful and hegemonic construction of a food security discourse<sup>1</sup> that has influenced policy actions and interventions throughout the global policy community. The concept retains a unifying power and political salience most often associated with times of crises, particularly the global food crises that have occurred over recent decades (Midgley, 2013).<sup>2</sup> The organizing power associated with the discourse of food security remains widely used by the international policymaking community (e.g. United Nations, G8 and G20 groups of nations); however, its global reach had not, until recently, extended into domestic United Kingdom (UK) or English policy.

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Therefore, when the UK and English Government under the leadership of Prime Minister Gordon Brown began to discuss household food security within the context of a developing English food policy and wider food security concerns this signalled a potentially significant change in public policy attention and possible policy intervention. The aim of this article is to problematize the recent emergence of household food security within English debates.

### *'Problematizing' Household Food Security*

The traditional conceptual lineage of household food security is associated with Sen's (1981) study of mid-twentieth century famines, which challenged prevailing constructions of food security as a supply-side problem. Sen argued that socio-economic capacities and distributional issues were also important in overcoming the 'acquisition problem' (1995, p. 34). The access of the individual and the capabilities they possessed to legally transform their bundles of entitlements (resources such as land, labour and money) into other goods (e.g. food) were critical. Entitlements are 'not an alternative term for the distribution of income or food' but recognize the different relations (economic, political, social and cultural) that can determine an individual's access to food (Hussain, 1995, p. 3). Thus, the household emerged as a further site and level of social organization and governance that came under the auspices of food security concerns. Such developments were pertinent at a time when 'neo-liberal' logics were beginning to reorder and reshape state powers. The practices associated with neo-liberal economic and political stances became apparent in relation to food security, at household, national and global scales, through, for example, the privatization of local social welfare landscapes and food provisioning for the vulnerable in the United States (US) (e.g. Poppendieck, 1995; Curtis, 1997; Warshawsky, 2010). The political purchase that the food security discourse continues to exert underpins the importance of exploring its application to new contexts and domestic policy settings, as well as critical consideration of the practices it can create and maintain that influence everyday life. Greater attention is being given to the framing of food security and the implications this has for politicization, contestation and change in agri-food systems and society (Mooney and Hunt, 2009; Rivera-Ferre, 2012). However, further exploration of the meanings and practices surrounding household food security is crucial as food is 'arguably... the most elemental material symbol of the social contract' (Patel and McMichael, 2009, p. 23). Household food security is frequently associated with welfare and safety-net responses by local and national governments worldwide. The discursive and material practices of household food security, and the political responses to it, can reproduce social, cultural and economic relations, and associated inequalities (McMichael, 2009). Consequently, I focus on exploring the emergence of household food security in England as a contemporary problem of welfare-related food provisioning.

'Problematizing' provides a way of thinking about household food security as a problem in relation to past and contemporary discourses and practices, and how these are understood and performed by different actors. Foucault notes that problematization

'does not mean the representation of a pre-existent object more the creation through discourse of an object that did not exist. It is the ensemble of discursive and non-discursive practices that make something enter in to the

play of true and false and constitute it as an object of thought (whether in the form of moral reflection, scientific knowledge, political analysis, etc.)' (Foucault in Collier et al., 2004, p. 3).

How different actors think about, construct and use the concept of household food security in relation to other discourses and practices (existing and possible) is key. Moreover, for a situation to be problematic 'social, economic and political processes' must 'have made it uncertain, to have made it lose its familiarity, or to have provoked a certain number or difficulties around it' (Foucault, 1984, p. 388). Thus, how the concept appears and develops (if at all) within a domestic setting requires attention to both historic and contemporary contexts.

### *'Problematization' as a Mode of Enquiry*

Collier et al. (2004, p. 3) note that "'problematization" is a technical term that suggests a particular way of analysing an event or situation' and propose it as a 'mode of enquiry' of the contemporary. Problematization involves identifying what has generated the situation that is perceived as a problem, and the possible responses, rather than suggesting a single resolution: 'it defines the elements that will constitute what the different solutions attempt to respond to' and in turn 'how these different solutions result from a specific form of problematization' (Foucault, 1984, p. 389). This necessitates 'second-order' observation to recognize the multiple possibilities that are contingent to the situation, rather than first-order observation with its sole orientation to identifying interventions (Collier et al., 2004). Therefore, problematization requires the situation to be viewed as a question as well as a problem (Rabinow, 2002). Problematizing a situation also encourages the recognition of past practice and its potential influence on the contemporary through the interplay of actors, knowledges, and conditions that can feedback and determine the construction of the problem at hand and resultant responses.

The relationship between the observer and the problematized situation is important. Therefore, it is imperative to recognize my position in relation to the 'problem' explored in this article and how this has influenced the choices made in data collection and analysis. The original research presented here is informed by my experience and involvement in UK food policy and food security discussions during the Brown administration, June 2007–May 2010 inclusive. Prior to autumn 2008 I was responsible for food policy research in a leading UK think tank. Consequently, interviews, conversations and observations informed the background thinking to this article, but due to ethical obligations these are not reproduced. After leaving the think tank I continued to be involved in policy discussions on food security. This change in role has meant a change from first-order to second-order observer in my research; a shift from identifying policy gaps and recommending specific actions to thinking beyond prescribed policy foci and practices (such as considering food provisioning for all households, not just those with children, which has been the traditional concern of British policymakers). I noticed that while considerable attention was given during debates to national and global food security concerns, comparatively little attention was given to the emerging concept of household food security. In combination these factors have influenced the approach followed. I focus on two research sites: policy texts wherein the problem was constructed and potential solutions identified; and,

interviews with third-sector actors to explore their understandings of the issue and their practices. I now discuss these sites in more detail.

This article traces the evolution of the Brown Government's construction of household food security through a discourse analysis of food policy documents published during this administrative period. These comprised seven published policy documents from: The Strategy Unit (TSU, 2008a, 2008b), Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra, 2008, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2010), and the published minutes of the Council of Food Policy Advisers established to advise the government on key areas of food policy and their two published reports (CFPA, 2009, 2010 – the latter published after the final food strategy and before the change in government). This administrative period also coincided with a number of global and domestic events that should be noted as contingent contextual factors to the food policy developments, and potential uncertainties and difficulties that could have unsettled or disrupted existing thinking and practice (cf. Foucault, 1984). These included: the most recent global food crisis and attendant food price inflation, the emerging global crisis in capitalism, along with internal UK political pressures such as the power shifts towards nationalist parties in the devolved administrations of Scotland and Wales, as well as wider crises in confidence regarding the Brown premiership. The article focuses on the Brown Government's food policy developments. This policy applies to England only as the devolved administrations (Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) developed their own food policies during this administrative period as food-related policy matters such as agriculture and health were not reserved to the UK government under devolutionary settlements (see Midgley, 2010). In conducting a discourse analytic approach I focus on the discursive structures (regularity of categories and ideas) as well as narratives, rhetoric and metaphors to explore and interpret the policy developments regarding household food security in the published documents (see Hajer, 1995, 2005; Hajer and Laws, 2006).

The article then contrasts the discursive constructions found within policy texts with those of third-sector actors who identified themselves as improving household food security, which were obtained through semi-structured interviews. The term third sector recognizes the variety of organizations that participated in the research and the range of activities undertaken. Participants were drawn from national organizations as well as those operating in different sites throughout the north-east region of England. Sample recruitment followed a purposeful strategy complemented by 'snowballing' recruitment (see Appendix 1 for description of organizations represented in this sample). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 16 organizations between September 2009 and February 2010 by the author/researcher. This period coincides with the end stages of the food policy developments and the Brown administration. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. All participants were asked about their perceptions of household food security and their activities in relation to policy and policymakers. Transcripts were initially analysed by theme and then discursively analysed following the approach previously outlined for the policy texts. This element of the methodological design attempted to capture how participants understood and constructed the issue, how this influenced practice, and if any discursive alignment or tension with the policy constructions could be identified.

The next section reports the analysis of this study in more detail. The discursive constructions identified in the policy texts are presented first; the main documents are discussed in sequential order of publication to reveal the emerging narrative construction of household food security by policymakers. These are followed by

the discursive constructions identified through interviews with third-sector actors. I then reflect on the problematization of the concept in England, and research on household food security more broadly.

### **The Discursive Construction of Household Food Security in English Policy Texts**

On entering office one early action of former Prime Minister Brown was to instruct a review of the UK's food policy framework. This appeared to be a step change in the way policymakers were prepared to engage with food as an overarching and cross-cutting issue rather than encountering food in different departmental contexts that led to disparate food-related policy approaches (Barling and Lang, 2003). As part of the review a discussion paper, *An Analysis of Issues*, was published (TSU, 2008a). In this document food security was discussed in relation to the national food supply chain and associated, possible threats. In stark contrast to previous policy discussions, the term 'food insecurity' appeared in connection to UK households. Little space was given to the matter in the document, which stated: 'Few people in the UK are hungry, but low income households are more at risk from food and nutritional insecurity' (TSU, 2008a, p. 74). Immediately, the connection between income levels and food insecurity is made, although the extent of this relationship is uncertain. What is important is the use of the term 'insecurity', suggesting an initial consideration of this issue as a potential problem and a situation of concern to policymakers. Also of importance is the distinction between food insecurity and nutritional insecurity (although neither term is defined), and that these issues are only associated with a specific population – low income households.

This early narrative built on the metaphor of 'hunger'. It constructed hunger as a stage or experience beyond food insecurity. From a historical perspective the discourse of hunger in Britain and its presence as a policy issue was reduced in both domestic and global arenas respectively, by the introduction of the post-war welfare state and its design to combat the evil of want, and the decline in the British Empire and its influence (Vernon, 2007). By the 1960s hunger was re-identified but was reframed as a form of deprivation and poverty (Vernon, 2007). The association between food and poverty (often referred to as 'food poverty'), and possible interventions in this relationship, goes back to the different forms of relief offered to the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor since the sixteenth-century poor law; they have continued to permeate cultural constructions of poverty (Jones, 2000). In contemporary British debates this concerns health outcomes (Dowler, 2002; DH, 2004, 2005), social welfare and the development of a social exclusion discourse (Levitas, 1998).

The metaphor of hunger was then strategically used to dismiss the experience of hunger as irrelevant in a UK setting, even though 'few people' preface the statement. The use of selected statistics from a recently published government agency survey of low income households and their diets suggested lack of money as the main reason why individuals consumed insufficient food (Holmes, 2007). However, the discussion paper omitted other results from this survey. The results provided evidence that food insecurity was present in low income UK households; indeed the survey had specifically followed the approach used by the US Department of Agriculture for measuring household food insecurity (Radimer, 2002). Results revealed that respondents who sometimes or often did not have enough food to eat had lost weight, 5% had not eaten for a whole day due to a lack of money and this happened at least three times a year (Holmes, 2007).

Initially policymakers constructed household food insecurity by: first, emphasizing its relative insignificance in relation to a master metaphor of hunger; and, second, as a potential problem but an anticipated and accepted outcome for a particular group within society (low income households). No questioning of inequalities within society and/or the food system is evident. Therefore, it was signalled very early in the policy process that household food security would be considered within existing decision-making and institutional structures and that low income households would be the target group to which any interventions would be applied.

The final food policy review document, *Food Matters*, presented a vision of an economically, socially and environmentally sustainable food system (TSU, 2008b). The review identified three roles for government in the food system: 'correcting market failures, addressing equity concerns and fostering positive culture change relating to food' (TSU, 2008b, p. 38). It is with regard to ensuring equity that policymakers build on their earlier narrative association of food insecurity with low income but now introduce the rhetoric of the welfare system as being able to respond to such needs: 'Generally this [safeguarding social equity] will be achieved through the tax and benefit system, but special measures may be needed in some cases to ensure that the more vulnerable in society have adequate access to nutritious food' (TSU, 2008b, p. 38). The 'special measures' refer to a long-standing scheme, Healthy Start (previously Welfare Foods), that supports the basic nutritional needs of infants, children under four years of age, mothers from low income households, and all pregnant women under 18 years of age, by providing vouchers to obtain fruit, vegetables and milk/infant formula. This statement marks a shift towards dietary health outcomes as an important component of the emerging construction of the problem.

The internal narrative of *Food Matters* reflects an adherence to the neo-liberal order (guided by free markets with minimal state intervention), arguing that while many issues become manifested by the food system it was better not to intervene in the food system but to 'target the source of the problem' (TSU, 2008b, p. 40). Continuing:

'real clarity is needed about what the problem is and where the appropriate point of intervention is. For example, the effects of poverty on access to food are better addressed through the tax and benefit system, and focused interventions targeting those most in need [i.e. Healthy Start], than by the Government attempting to drive food prices below the economic cost of production' (TSU, 2008b, p. 40).

In *Food Matters* the terminology of 'household food insecurity' vanishes, as did explicit mention of nutritional insecurity. The document's narrative constructed the 'problem' by linking poor food access (symptom) to poverty (problem). Here policymakers are attempting to problematize the issue, but this process is embedded within an ideological position and decision-making structure that advanced the argument that there was a clear, existing and adequate institutional response to poverty through the state welfare system, with additional support – for low income mothers and their children – to ensure the equity it proclaimed. Consequently, the narrative argument was building to outline a defensive position that advocated no further action. The review document's internal narrative presented a justification of the existing social order, distribution of resources, and institutional practice.

The emerging policy construction of household food insecurity was inconsistent. For example, Defra – which would later be tasked with taking the government lead on cross-departmental food policy delivery – in a discussion document published

in the same month as TSU (2008b) used the term 'household food security' but linked this only with 'affordability', stating that 'everyone should be able to afford a healthy diet' (Defra, 2008, p. 29). Whereas, 'access' was only associated with transport and food distribution systems. The uncertainty and ambiguity may not just be a necessary stage for problematization to enable the situation to be contextualized but a stage that is necessary for policymakers to ultimately order the issue (Hajer and Laws, 2006). The change in terminology from 'insecurity' to 'security' also suggests a change by policymakers in their constructions of the situation, moving from a potential problem towards an outcome orientation that could denote a productive application of the discourse's power rather than adopting a disciplinary stance.

The government published its *UK Food Security Assessment* in the following year (Defra, 2009a, 2009b). This document is important for five reasons. First, the transition to an outcome orientation was confirmed. The documents discussed 'household food security' rather than 'insecurity', and 'food affordability' was noted as an 'outcome' of the 'logical framework of the food security assessment' (Defra, 2009b, p. 6). Second, household food security was mentioned throughout the document, with occasional reference to 'household affordability and access' (e.g. Defra, 2009a, p. 12). Moreover, an informal definition of household food security was being used: 'challenges to household food security in the UK relate to access at all times to available and affordable food' (Defra, 2009a, p. 18), which echoes and imports the FAO definition and trade-orientated discourse (Lawrence and McMichael, 2012; Lee, 2013). Third, the role of the state in the food system, and in ensuring household food security was stressed. For example, while stating that 'every Briton should have access to an affordable, healthy diet; achieving this is at the core of Government policy', the statement continued: 'For the Government, this also means ensuring food is available in any civil emergency' (Defra, 2009a, p. 11). The new association with 'civil emergency' was an acknowledgement of contemporary pressures linked to fuel strikes and the disruption this could cause to food distribution if food industry behaviours did not maintain normal operations. This asserts a dominance of the state in food provisioning and the security of circulation (Foucault, 2009), which previous documents (TSU, 2008a, 2008b) had refrained from, presenting the state as one amongst many actors in the food system.

Fourth, the indicators reveal the influence and feedback of past representations of policy problems. Three key indicators are used to construct household food security: the relative prices of fruit and vegetables for low income households, food price change in real terms, and household access (as physical distance) to food stores. The indicators reflect a composite framing of household food security relating to dietary health, income inequality and physical accessibility. This reflected the long history of the presence and relationship of these particular variables, which can be found in British policy discussions of food poverty and access and the implications for health inequalities (e.g. DH, 1996, 2004, 2005; Acheson, 1998) and social exclusion (e.g. Lang, 1997; SEU, 1998; Wrigley, 2002). However, none of these previous discussions engaged with household food security.

The fifth and final aspect was the status of the *UK Food Security Assessment* and its role in the governance of household food security in England (as well as wider food security). This was a discussion document with no policy weight or delivery requirements, providing a descriptive statistical statement on the extent of food security at different political scales represented through a selected indicator set. This provided a safe environment for policymakers to think about household food secu-

rity, affordability and access without implicating future interventions and resource commitments. In doing so the *Assessment* constructs a relative norm that represents a desired outcome for the population and against which future progress and policy actions could be measured. This role of the document reflects the logic of normalization (Rabinow, 1984; Foucault, 2009). The latter involves the development of ideas and representations of the norm (discourses, statistical knowledge and measures) within a population that acts as the basis by which any deviation is determined and dealt with to ensure the population's welfare. Normalization thus becomes a practice of security (Foucault, 2009). The logic of normalization could be construed as ensuring the norm of household food security for both individuals and society as normalization enables a 'shift from exclusion to inclusion, to sending the victims outside the bounds of the polity, to a mechanism... that allows them to be contained within' (Elden, 2007, p. 564). However, as normalization processes attempt to bring unfavourable and deviating behaviours into line, the identification of what is the norm and what is marginal to this is critical. The population and the norm are therefore both relative and political constructions. This has implications for how the population group identified as marginal is governed, which is brought to the fore in the final food strategy.

During 2009 a further document, *Food Matters: One Year On* (Defra, 2009c), was published. This discussion document only mentioned food security in relation to domestic consumers and increasing the amount of information available to enable them to make informed decisions about eating local and seasonal food. It is an inclusive framing, applying household food security to the entire population, but it also marks a shift towards constructing household food security as a cultural issue and the responsibility of the individual consumer. Thus, the narrative begins to adhere to an ideology of 'rights with responsibilities' that is closely associated with New Labour (the Government); this combines moral new-right thinking with collective welfare provisioning. This ideology was also epitomized in the final food strategy.

In January 2010 the government published *Food 2030*, its overarching food strategy for a 'sustainable, secure and healthy food system' (Defra, 2010, p. 4). The strategy's narrative discussed food security primarily in the context of national and global scales and concerns. With respect to food affordability the document noted recent food price rises and how these had affected low income households; food now accounted for 17% of their average household spend compared to 15% in 2005, and 11% for all households. In contrast to the *UK Food Security Assessment*, the government constructed food affordability as beyond its control, arguing that the European Common Agricultural Policy had kept food prices artificially high, which affected low income households disproportionately. In the strategy there was one mention of food security in relation to UK households, but this issue was now firmly situated within a discursive framing orientated towards both sustainability and health outcomes: to achieve the goal of 'enabling and encouraging people to eat a healthy and sustainable diet' (Defra, 2010, p. 16). This document marked the effective end point of the policy problematization of household food security and the emerging narrative in English policy. The strategy asserted that:

'Low income families have poorer health than the general population. The reasons for this are complex, but diet plays a role. Households need access to affordable, nutritious food to give them food security. The Government's *UK Food Security Assessment* shows that physical access to food is not itself a significant problem, nor a significant negative factor in diets.



There are however a number of other barriers to accessing healthy food including lack of income, education and skills, which affect low income and other vulnerable groups more acutely. A lot of work is already underway to address these barriers such as increasing access to fruit and vegetables through the Healthy Start initiative, and small-scale local initiatives, including food distribution charities and community food growing initiatives' (Defra, 2010, p. 13).

This statement represents the problematized complexity of household food security; the contributing factors and the mix of appropriate responses. Income levels remain pivotal to this construction. However, the narrative draws on, and continues, traditional policy explanations and discourses of food poverty experienced by British households as being due to underlying cultural practices that reflect 'human inefficiencies' in budgeting, food purchasing, preparation and cooking skills (Dowler, 2002, p. 706). This cultural problem and the proposed solution extends the government's 'licence to operate' in individual choice, which policymakers were hesitant to suggest earlier as dietary decisions could be seen as a matter of individual choice but noted how 'cultural change' arguments could be used to expand the basis of government intervention (TSU, 2008b, p. 40). It suggests that the constructed problem is beyond income inequality and by implication the capabilities of the welfare state to respond to it in isolation.

The narrative's focus expands from being solely orientated to low income households to include 'vulnerable groups'. Both population groups are situated within a 'local' context. This shift is enhanced by reference to these groups as 'socially excluded' in the strategy's action points (Defra, 2010, p. 18). The rhetoric of social exclusion is one of socio-spatial polarization<sup>3</sup> and marginalization, and builds on a complex and problematic pre-existing UK policy discourse of social exclusion (Levitas, 1998). This reiterates the need to bring marginalized individuals and groups within social norms. Utilizing the social exclusion discourse enables spatial inequality to be associated with constructions of household food security. The pre-existing power of social exclusion as a recognized discourse deployed by the government in this instance provides the justification for spatial and community responses rather than the solution stemming solely from the welfare system. Thus, there is the explicit instruction requiring 'small-scale local' and 'community' responses by third-sector organizations to deal with household access and food security.

The above extract appears immediately before text noting the relative extent of food security for households in 'developing countries'. This contextualization suggests a further strategic and political positioning of the issue that attempts to emphasize the importance of UK government commitments to enabling healthy and sustainable diets within global food security and development concerns given wider security threats:

'In global terms... high food prices have a greater impact in developing countries. Households in developing countries spend over 60% of their budget on food. Maternal and child under-nutrition in developing countries remains a concern. There are significant new global threats to good nutrition including the volatility of food prices, climate change and its impact' (Defra, 2010, p. 13).

At the end of the Brown administration the problematization of household food security constructed a problem that was associated with specific population groups

who must be helped to overcome identified 'barriers' to enable the desired policy outcome to be achieved. The matter had been subsumed into wider food governance issues and pre-existing political ideologies regarding welfare state support (rights with responsibilities) and policy discourses, perhaps most importantly that of social exclusion to construct food-related welfare as a facet of socio-spatial polarization, which could only be responded to on a social (welfare system for the most vulnerable) and spatial (local and community) basis. This situation could be resolved through existing institutional arrangements to bring the marginal population within societal norms. Table 1 summarizes the narrative argument and discourses identified in the policy texts.

Concurrent to the above policy developments were the discussions of the Council of Food Policy Advisors (October 2008–March 2010 inclusive). Analysis of the Council's minutes of meetings and reports illustrate the dominance of existing discourses and practices surrounding food poverty and access and the contentious nature of these within English debates. The Council's discussions are framed in terms of 'poverty' and 'food poverty' (CFPA, 2009, 2010, see minutes 11 May 2009 and 14 September 2009)<sup>4</sup> with a further shift towards 'inequalities of access to a healthy low [environmental] impact diet' as a proposed policy priority (CFPA, 2010, pp. 4, 8, 9) wherein physical, economic and cultural access to food is noted (aligning to the FAO construction and adhering to the final policy position of Defra, 2010). In the meeting of 14 September 2009 under the item headed 'Food Poverty' it was noted: 'Recent research suggests that people do not like the word "poverty"... Access is as important as affordability'. Nowhere in the reports or meeting minutes is the terminology of household food (in)security mentioned. This suggests that for this concept to emerge in England it required the backing and power of central government policymakers to use and import the language in the process of developing a food policy

**Table 1.** The discursive construction of household food security in English food policy texts (2008–2010).

Narrative sequence	Source	Discourse
<i>Beginning:</i>		
Acceptance of risk of food insecurity for low income households as a problem.	TSU, 2008a	Hunger metaphor as counter discourse
<i>Middle:</i>		
Poverty can impact on access to food but equity provided through welfare system, this may be targeted to the most nutritionally vulnerable and so no change to the existing system is necessary.	TSU, 2008b	Poverty
Shift towards outcomes so that household food security becomes a metaphor for access and affordability.	Defra, 2009a, 2009b; CFPA, 2009, 2010	Social exclusion
Consumers should be provided with information to choose food that is sustainable and local.	Defra, 2009c	Rights with responsibilities
<i>End:</i>		
Food security of households is linked to healthy behaviours and choices through overcoming barriers of low income, education and skills.	Defra, 2010; CFPA, 2010	Social exclusion
Emphasis on most vulnerable groups in their localities, local charitable responses are appropriate in addition to the welfare state.		
These issues are significant problems globally and particularly problematic for the global south.	Defra, 2010	Global development and security

that was embedded within global debates (on human rights discourse importation, see Gordon and Berkevitch, 2007).

### **Third-sector Perspectives on Household Food Security**

#### *Constructing the Problem – Poverty*

The managers and directors of organizations who participated in this research perceived that their activities improved the food security of households and wider communities, and frequently presented narratives concerning poverty in different settings and its effects on food provisioning practices. Participants often recounted the experiences of their clients going without food or struggling to purchase food, which they used to ground their arguments. In contrast to the policy framings such accounts were used to construct the problem as one of structural poverty rather than a cultural failing. This led to a range of responses, including food redistribution and growing suggested by policymakers. For example, the manager of a youth project providing wider food access activities noted:

‘Yes, it is poverty, because I would say, if they didn’t need it, they wouldn’t come, and some of them depend on that bag of stuff [food parcel] every week, not all of them. It does help them out, but some of them do... we fill applications in for them... they’re lucky if they’ve got £10 left [from state benefit support], once they’ve paid their bills... and that’s for food for all week. What can you get with £10?’

To help put this comment in perspective at the time of interview, early 2010, Davis et al. (2010) identified that a single person of working age required £44.34 per week to meet minimum income / societal standards for food consumption. This figure is at least four times the amount referred to by the project manager.

Consequently, a lot of the organizations were supplementing low income households and vulnerable consumers by providing meals or food-bank services in response to perceived needs. Other participants spoke of their services helping vulnerable and/or low income groups (including the homeless, recently housed, lone parents, refugees, people in low paid employment, and in one case sex workers). Notably not all of these categories related to children in contrast to the policy interventions justified on the basis on infant and child health. For example, a community kitchen manager directly commented on the way the kitchen was used by clients to subsidize their low incomes:

‘So everybody is subsidized, I mean, not everybody is on the streets or living rough. A lot of people are housed on their friend’s floor and they use what money they’ve got and then they subsidize their income by coming here.’

Whereas the manager of a regional food redistribution franchise commented:

‘The government aren’t ever going to admit that there’s food poverty in Britain, but there is; it’s just the tip of the iceberg the people we’re working with.’

However, constructing the issue as a poverty problem was problematic in itself. The director of a national food and agriculture campaign network discussed the difficulties they had encountered over time:

'We made a very big song and dance about calling it food poverty, specifically because when we were doing the work, it was during the last Conservative Government, where, as you know there was no such thing as society, no such thing as poverty, so we made a big deal about saying: "Yes, there is" ... When there was a change of government and there was such a thing as society and there is such a thing as poverty and everybody recognized the problem, we also recognized that a lot of the groups who might want to be part of such a support network, that actually the term poverty wasn't particularly attractive. People... probably were poor, but the poverty wasn't particularly the thing that they identified themselves as being, so we stopped calling it food poverty because there's no longer any political need, we thought, to do that. Nor did people want to identify themselves in that way. And the jargon of the time was access... And then we got to the... end of the point where actually we thought that defining it as food access was particularly helpful, because both food poverty and food access had come from a health inequality background.'

Continuing:

'All of the language, none of it works. Poverty didn't work. I don't think access works much better to be honest. Food security definitely does not do it for me... the main thing it should mean, is that people on low incomes wouldn't be on low incomes, because obviously the main problem is poverty... And I think one of the reasons for that is because if we characterize the problem as being about poverty or low income, immediately the majority of the population think, subconsciously, nothing to do with me. They'll probably think first, "oh, that's a shame"... but it is not "them". And if most people think, "that's nothing to do with me", that means there's no votes in it, which politicians can then think, "well, it's nothing to do with me either"... And it's not much of a media story... so we've lost getting anybody's attention to do anything about it, before we even get past first base.'

This extensive narrative highlights the complexity of finding a discourse that actors can align and engage with to begin to initiate change and effectively challenge the existing social order and decision-making framework associated with food-related welfare. Moreover, this participant highlights the problem of awareness and recognition but then translating those into action given the legacies of successive British poverty debates (outlined previously). The account also emphasizes that how an issue is named is important: 'food poverty', 'food access' and 'food security' were not perceived as interchangeable, with particular inferences and discursive understandings associated with each. This contrasts the eliding of terms by some authors in a UK context (e.g. Dowler and O'Connor, 2012; CFPA, 2009, 2010; see also note 4).

The national campaign network director then discussed how their organization had reframed the issue to overcome the problematic constructions of poverty, access and security:

'I think probably the way we're dealing with it... is running projects and campaigns which, if we win, they will disproportionately benefit people on low incomes, so for example, protecting children from junk-food marketing... [will] disproportionately protect children from families on low incomes because it's families on low incomes who feel most pressured to buy

branded goods and junk food, to help their kids to feel part of society... so we never say: "This is a campaign about poor children". Ever. But actually poor children, I think, benefit more from it.'

In doing so they created an alternative construction of the situation that stimulated a non-traditional policy response. This disruption enabled other actors to align themselves and work in coalition to advocate a change in policy (see Hajer, 1995). However, the disruption was reliant on being able to link to an existing rhetoric of obesity and the broad acceptance of this as a growing social, economic and health problem.

Elsewhere, there was a clearer alignment between one national third-sector organization and the Brown administration. The national food redistribution network manager while emphasizing how they wanted to have a 'long-term impact on... all people that are suffering from food poverty' commented:

'But we are sometimes not sure which aspect we should talk most about. So I think before we would mostly talk about food being diverted away from landfill and talk about the environmental benefits of our work. Now, with more and more focus on food security, and because we have to compete against the greener technologies that are really good for the environment, we have to highlight this aspect that makes us unique, which is that we ensure that food goes to people first.'

The agreement between the government's and this organization's narratives linked together food poverty and food waste as a way of resolving problems associated with the food system (see Poppendieck, 1995). These two issues were positioned within wider food security and sustainability discourses that were policy priorities of the Brown administration. Food redistribution offered a means by which both parties could make the most of the opportunity presented by this particular policy window; food redistribution gained national attention and policy support, whereas policymakers could bring these issues within existing discursive frameworks and institutional behaviours presented in *Food 2030* (see Kingdon, 1995). As Poppendieck (1995, pp. 29–30) notes regarding hunger alleviation in the US the 'awareness of the possibility of "solution" is a precondition for the perception of a problem' and that the 'nature of the available remedy contributes to the content of the typification'.

### *Constructing the Problem – Institutional Failings*

In direct contrast to the policy rhetoric that argued the welfare system was the most appropriate mechanism for responding to 'the effects of poverty on access to food' (TSU, 2008b, p. 40) participants expressed considerable disdain for the welfare system's functioning and ability to do this. Participants commented that increasingly they/third-sector organizations were enabling people to 'get by' rather than the state supporting individuals. The manager of a youth charity who had initiated food support activities commented that:

'You shouldn't have to have charities in place for people to make ends meet or to help them with their food.'

This highlights the different expectations expressed by participants as to with whom responsibility for household food security lay: the state, third sector or in combination. This reflected a long-standing debate regarding the roles of philanthropy and

the state in responding to poverty, including food poverty (Leat, 1998; Jones, 2000; Dowler and Caraher, 2003), of which household food insecurity was the latest stage. This is important given that the responsibility for addressing household food security was transferred in part from the state to third-sector organizations (food redistribution and food growing organizations) in the final strategy document.

At the time of interview food-bank managers expressed frustration regarding the increase in recession-related unemployment and poverty they were responding to. They noted an increase in the number of food parcels requested to help households where benefit claimants were waiting for payments to arrive following recognition of their eligibility by the state. Based on these accounts the delay was taking at best an average of two to three weeks. Consequently, it could be argued that some organizations were subsidizing the welfare system and its institutional inefficiencies. The director of a national food-bank organization explained the situation as follows:

'And so a lot more people have been made redundant or they've lost their jobs or their contracts have not been renewed. And in the face of all of that, pressures on individuals and families has not gone away. And we haven't got a, what I would call, a government structure, or a national framework for speeding up the response to individuals' needs. And for example, little things like when people go for their benefits, government is unable to provide benefits in a timely manner and the crisis hotline which is supposed to be the solution to making sure that people who are entitled to their benefits get immediate financial support, is just overwhelmed and doesn't work. So we are finding that we are increasingly called upon to provide support for people who, for want of a better description, are entitled to benefits.'

Moreover, the director's narrative went on to highlight how those experiencing food insecurity did not neatly fit into policy constructions of the socially excluded:

'Low income and low rates of benefits does trap a lot of people in poverty. That's an endemic problem and that needs to be addressed. But on the other hand there are lots of people who do get into crisis who may not be entitled to extra support from the state who just need a temporary hand and for those people you can't say, "Oh well, the government should be bailing them out". What we're saying to them is, it would be jolly nice if the government could be bailing them out, but where do you draw the line. Now I'm not in the business of telling the government where to draw the line. What we want to do is to tell the government we're willing to work in partnership with you to make sure that people who are in poverty get some kind of support.'

What is evident in this extract is the perceived boundary between what institution (state, third sector or in combination) should have responsibility for overcoming food insecurity and the possible negotiation of roles. But, also how this is blurred by the distinction made in the categorization of those eligible for state support and those who need more temporary help.

Another food-bank manager also discussed the institutional inadequacy of the welfare system for those in 'crisis' – this term draws on and reflects a status used in British welfare policy for discretionary 'crisis loans' to individuals. The leaflet produced by the organization to encourage food donations and raise awareness of the service utilizes this rhetoric (see Figure 1). The leaflet emphasizes and reports the

failings of the benefit system for individuals and households, and uses the rhetorical power of ‘people in crisis’ to construct the need for additional support for households in the local community to access food.

The food-bank manager stated that their organization was struggling to stay open and expected to close (and subsequently did one month after interview). For the manager this was worrying as they could not identify any other provision to meet the existing local need, stating:

‘There will be nothing available... we sent everyone [referral organizations/agencies] a questionnaire... asking what other options were available for people in this situation and there is no other organization... I have had a probation worker said he went out and bought some stuff for somebody, but clearly they’re not supposed to. So that’s it. You know, Social Services, the government, you know, nobody acknowledges the need.’

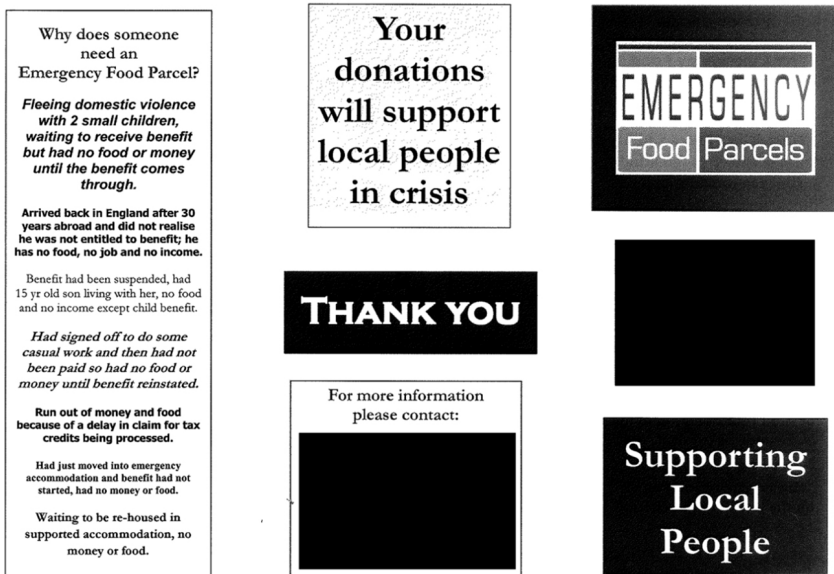
One explanation given by the food-bank manager was that charitable funders assumed that the state system met any poverty-related need (‘the basics’), and hence funding was orientated to other areas of perceived need. Consequently, the food bank could not find support from either the charitable or public sector to fund emergency food relief services:

‘It’s not one of the “in” things. The “in thing” is children, youth work, getting them off the streets, healthy living, but just the basics, it just doesn’t fit into people’s criteria.’

Continuing:

‘Because we’re working in an area, which is not recognized as being an area of need... for example, if the government or the council said, “Oh yes, we

Figure 1. Emergency food parcel leaflet (2009).



Source: anonymized, reproduced with permission.

actually do need an organization to be providing forty food parcels a week, who can we get to do that, or who can we support to do that." There is no recognition of that need whatsoever.'

## Conclusions

I have problematized the emergence of household food security in England from a second-order perspective to gain an insight into how the construction and perception of a problem can influence the identification and justification of responses by different actors (Foucault, 1984; Collier et al., 2004). The focus has been on welfare-related matters of household food security as a representation of the social contract in a contemporary setting (Patel and McMichael, 2009). The analysis has revealed how the situation and potential responses were constrained by the dominance of existing institutions (the welfare state), discourses (food poverty and social exclusion), and political ideology (rights with responsibilities and the neo-liberal order).

In more detail, the institution of the welfare state dominated policy and practitioner perceptions to the extent that this was institutionalized into responses. For example, policymakers deemed this system as being the most appropriate to address the impacts of poverty on food provisioning, and their utilization of welfare state rhetoric in policy texts closed down possible changes in welfare delivery to respond to the situation. Whilst practitioners constructed the welfare system as contributing to the problem, yet incorporated this institution and its practices into their responses, such as food-bank support for individuals in crisis. Both policy texts and practitioner accounts reflected the presence of the welfare state and poverty in connection to food provisioning; yet, this is where any similarity revealed by the problematization ends. Practitioner perspectives were subject to the powerful discursive legacy of food poverty and access, and remained focused on responding to these issues through a variety of actions. Whereas, policy texts made household food security an 'object of thought' (Foucault in Collier et al., 2004, p. 3), and consequently enabled the concept to be constructed as *different* to poverty, and support justifications for a different approach that was orientated to countering socio-spatial exclusion and stimulating cultural change through personal responsibility in food choices (TSU, 2008b; Defra, 2010).

Problematizing household food security by following the term's introduction into an English policy setting revealed the concept's organizing power. It also highlighted how the concept was strategically and opportunistically adopted and adapted by policymakers. For example, hunger was constructed as a relatively extreme experience to household food insecurity. This enabled policymakers to use the metaphor of hunger to close down consideration, and potential recognition, of hunger in English households but open up the possibility of food insecurity existing. Whereas later in the policy process the recognition of household food security as a domestic policy issue was made possible in part through food redistribution practices offering policymakers a ready-made solution (Poppendieck, 1995; Kingdon, 1995). Moreover, the problematization process explicitly undertaken by policymakers (reflected in TSU, 2008a, 2008b) utilized the concept as a device to maintain rather than question the existing distribution of resources in society. This may have prevented consensus between policy and third-sector actors about the problem and possible solutions, and contributed to the limited mobilization around household food security and its subsequent failure to extend into participant perspectives, particularly when the



dominance of existing discourses is recognized. This also holds implications for future policy developments and debates surrounding food provisioning and welfare in England.

The policy developments also highlighted how household food security was used as a governing mechanism: reflecting techniques associated with normalization processes (Foucault, 2009). In the policy texts individuals classed as insecure became subject to the operation of political and relative cultural constructions of their behaviours and situations – epitomized through social exclusion rhetoric – leading to attempts to bring the marginal population and individual behaviours into closer adherence to the prescribed norm represented by household food security and its association with responsible food choices. In contrast, third-sector participants tended to emphasize the processes and/or relations that generated and represented the problem rather than the norm and what outcomes could be achieved; often appearing problem driven rather than outcome orientated, which may also account for the disparity between policy and practitioner representations of the situation.

The article has emphasized the need to examine how household food security is understood in different contexts with the implications this holds for all within society (included and excluded, secure and insecure). In England, the concept could only be discerned by contrasting it with those signifiers attached to food poverty, food access and social exclusion. This echoes the importance of recognizing the concept as a political and relative construct. Thus, in different places household food security will have different meanings and implications for the social contract, social norms, and everyday practice. Attention must continue to be placed on how this organizing concept organizes.

The organizing work takes place through the redrawing of the social contract: who and what is to be the focus of resource (re)distribution and the mechanisms by which this is to be delivered. As the achievement of household food security is considered to be beyond the capabilities of the welfare state alone, by both policymakers and research participants, a mixed food welfare landscape has emerged. This new landscape might reproduce or re-express existing inequalities; it might also provide new opportunities to challenge them.

## Notes

1. A discourse is a system of meaning that can influence material practice.
2. Challenges to the concept's power are occurring as food security becomes politicized and its applicability to contemporary practice is questioned by the rights-based discourse of food sovereignty in different contexts (Patel, 2009; Lawrence and McMichael, 2012; Lee, 2013).
3. Social exclusion is not referred to elsewhere in the strategy but appears in a later document (CFPA, 2010, p. 9) accompanied by a naïve construction of spatial exclusion illustrated by a photograph of a street of terraced housing (signifying a traditional working class area), taken from behind a wire fence with a skip of rubbish in the foreground.
4. Archived minutes are published online at <<http://archive.defra.gov.uk/foodfarm/food/policy/council/reports.htm>>.

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## Appendix

**Table A1.** Sample description by organizational activity and site.

Main organizational activity	Site of activity		
	National (UK)	Regional (Northeast England only)	Local only (specific sites in Northeast England)
Emergency relief	1		3
Food growing		2	2
Health			1
Food retail/redistribution	1	3	
Advocacy	2		
Charitable funder	1		