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Structural Inequalities and Food Insecurity Series

Briefing Note #4: How do immigration
policies impact on food insecurity?

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Introduction

In June 2021, the Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN), Feeding Britain, Sustain and the University of York hosted a webinar discussion with over 150 participants to consider the impact of immigration policies on food security. We heard from experts by experience, food bank managers, and other third sector workers. Participants discussed the UK's socio-political and historical immigration policy context, as well as practices of third sector organisations. They considered how these all work to influence the ability of refugees, migrants and people who are seeking asylum to afford food and other essentials - both before and after the Covid-19 pandemic. This briefing is structured according to the webinar. It provides a brief background to the UK's immigration policy environment and explains key terminology in this area. It then addresses the three broad questions that structured the webinar, drawing upon the evidence heard as part of the session and evidence submitted through an additional evidence gathering process. The briefing closes with key recommendations for change to improve the financial security of migrant communities in the UK.

Background

Social constructs of race and identity in the UK have shaped its long history of racialised and discriminatory immigration policy. Dr Jasber Singh (Centre for Agroecology Water and Resilience at Coventry University) opened the session by contextualising the UK's current immigration policy within this longer historical context. The hostile environment, he described, 'is both historic and racialised.' The first immigration policy introduced in 1905, came at a time when Britain had an empire and was born in response to growing concerns and anxieties about Jewish immigration, in particular to London. Closely associated with this was the 1925 special restriction order, or 'Coloured Alien Seamen Act' - again meeting and creating anxieties of race with policies clearly demarcated along racialised lines. The act gave police the power to monitor the whereabouts of people from the colonised nations legitimately working on ships in port towns, to ensure they did not settle in the UK. A long history follows of both repression through immigration policy

and resistance to racism, including the 1958 Notting Hill Riots, 1962 Commonwealth Act (that declared a so-called limited ability of the host country to assimilate 'coloured immigrants'), Enoch Powell's infamous 'Rivers of Blood' speech, and the 1970s 'virginity tests' at Heathrow airport for South Asian female immigrants - being just some of the instances that can illuminate how racism correlates with the UK's history of immigration control.

While legislation such as the Race Relations (Amendment) Act in 2000, and the Equalities Act in 2010 prevents explicitly legislating along lines of race, as was done in the past [1], Dr Singh spoke on how this history can explain the picture of immigration in Britain today, including detention centres, enforced destitution on migrant communities, 'go home' vans and UKBA raids as 'racialised outcomes' - even if race is not a key explicit feature of any current immigration policy.

If race is still very closely linked to immigration policy, how does this relate to the picture of food insecurity in modern Britain? Asylum seekers are disproportionately represented among food bank users in the UK with 3% of food bank users being asylum seekers, who constitute just 0.1% of households in the UK. The Trussell Trust's most recent State of Hunger report shows this figure rising to 11% following the lockdown in March 2020 [2]. The No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) condition is proven to lead to food insecurity and destitution, and almost half of all children with foreign-born parents living in the UK are living in poverty. In fact, children with foreign-born parents constitute 25% of all children in the UK living in poverty [3].

Immigration policy and enforcement, the NRPF condition, and food insecurity go hand-in-hand. Research with undocumented migrants in Birmingham, for example, suggests that even before the Covid-19 pandemic, 9 out of 10 in this group were food insecure [4]. The arrival of the Covid-19 pandemic has not only exacerbated this hardship but brought new and deserved attention to the policies and structures that produce it.

Note on terminology

Asylum Seeker - someone who has left their country of origin to seek refuge in another country and is currently waiting for a decision to be made on their claim. They are not able to claim mainstream benefits and in the majority of cases they are not allowed to work. They can receive cash support that equates to just under 40 pounds a week per person. An asylum seeker will also be given accommodation by the state.

Refugee - an asylum seeker who has been granted refugee status. Once they have this - they have 28 days to leave accommodation and apply to mainstream benefits or to find employment.

No Recourse to Public Funds - someone subject to immigration control and has no access to public funds. NRPF prohibits access to most mainstream welfare benefits and support/services that are conditional upon certain benefits including things like housing support and free school meals or Healthy Start vouchers. In response to legal action there has been an extension of free school meals and Healthy Start vouchers to some children from families with NRPF, however the conditionality attached to this extension mean that many children are still missing out.

1. What particular experiences and issues do migrant communities face in the UK that impact on their ability to afford and access food?

Tandy Nicole, a Volunteer Peer Food Researcher and expert by experience from the Govan Community Project (a community project working with asylum seekers based in Glasgow), gave testimony on the lived experience of asylum seekers facing food insecurity. Tandy's presentation was given on

behalf of Govan Community's Food for All research group. She explained how, for an asylum seeker with No Recourse to Public Funds, the experience of accessing support is very different to that of a citizen who is eligible for public funds. An asylum seeker living off £39.63 a week (although, she explains, there is often discrepancy in this amount) has many 'competing needs' they must meet to sustain themselves. Food, toiletries, cleaning products, over the counter medication, clothes, internet access, phone data and clothing are all essential items needed for an individual to get by, and the experience of choosing which need to meet, or going without food to buy other essentials is undignified. During the pandemic, individuals 'were not able to buy painkillers or antiseptics as we did not have that money.' Even, in a 'first world' country, Tandy remarked, 'people who become sick are not able to help themselves in a time of need.'

Hassan Elhourani, an activities manager at St. Augustine's Centre Halifax, distributing over 200 meals every week, stated in his written evidence, that: 'I can see how much this food is important for the people seeking asylum. The 37 or 39 pounds per week is nothing compared with how much the person needs to live a good life with basic things.'

This experience is epitomised in a case study from the Govan Community Project of 'Miriam' a 65-year old Muslim woman who is diabetic and for whom English is a second language. Receiving the £39.63 a week in Home Office support, she had recently been moved out of a Home Office hotel into a flat in a new area. Miriam was told about a food pantry offering more choice and fresh food than the local food bank. When she arrives, she is asked for her ID card, but is not asked about dietary needs and restrictions. She finds the pantry model confusing and cannot understand what most of the staff are saying. She feels rushed and does not have time to look at the unfamiliar products and ingredient labels. The only item available in the protein category is sausages, which she can't eat because she is Muslim. Eventually, she is only able to get tinned vegetables including beans, as well as milk, bread and potatoes - which she cannot in fact eat as she is diabetic, but she felt it was rude to keep saying no. This is what happens to many asylum seekers, like Miriam, who are trying to access food without the right support.

Gokhan, an expert by experience from Brighter Futures (a project supporting young people facing immigration issues), said that his experience mirrored this; 'it is degrading how the Home Office views asylum seekers.' Stating that, 'people seeking asylum are living in accommodation with no access to facilities to cook their own food and no choice in the given food, which is close to its sell by date and poor in quality.' When you need to rely on handouts from food banks, temples and churches, he adds, the food 'is mostly canned goods and a lack of fresh options.' 'Everyone deserves a good life' added Aurea, also an expert by experience from Brighter Futures, 'people should not be given expired food.'

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Evidence also shows the difficulties asylum seekers face in accessing culturally appropriate food. Aurea, who is from Cameroon, gave an example of when she was given Indian food to cook at home by a food aid provider: 'I had never eaten Indian food and I did not know how to cook it. This was very difficult.' Similarly, Béatrice Humarau, who works in a voluntary sector organisation in Norwich, submitted evidence via our online form, and wrote that outside of political and structural changes, there is more that food aid services could be doing to improve experience for users from the migrant community: '[We need] more diversity within the food parcels offered. We understand the challenges of this, but many food banks include tinned food like baked beans in their parcels. Many of our service users from a migrant background are not used to this type of food.'

2. How can food aid projects cater to the needs of migrant communities in the here and now?

Only structural changes can ensure that all people are able to afford culturally appropriate food for themselves. Yet, as phrased by Dee Woods, co-founder of Granville Community Kitchen, 'while we are doing the political change work, we need to also do work on the ground to make sure people can access culturally and dietary appropriate food with dignity.' The following points are ways that food aid projects can improve the experience of these migrant communities:

- **A flexible, holistic, person centered approach**

Tandy Nicole from the Govan Community Project emphasises the importance of 'looking at the overall needs' of a person. Even for projects that deliver a good service, if a model is too rigid in approach, this can undermine people's needs. It is important to pay attention to health-related dietary needs or intolerances, religious dietary restrictions and cultural preferences. For example, considering if someone is observing Ramadan, what would they want to eat? Even if those needs cannot necessarily be met, 'having this conversation with people can go a long way.'

'Most asylum seekers feel like beggars... they feel that they need to accept everything, but this should not be the case.'

Anette James from Michah Liverpool, shared that 70-80% of the service users at Michah are asylum seekers or refugees. She explained the logistical difficulties they have experienced in providing food for individuals based in hostels or hotels with no cooking facilities: 'it is hard to provide ambient food... a lot of donated fresh food is not fit for purpose, and we had to compost a lot of it.' But in the first instance, she stated, it is always important to recognise the people beyond immigration status. 'These are whole people with dignity, who are in a particular circumstance.' They have found that linking up with different charities wherever possible has been key in providing more rounded and holistic support.

- **Avoid unnecessary gatekeeping**

Gatekeeping can occur in various forms - for instance, invasive questions as part of a registration process, the collection of unnecessary personal data or restrictions on how many times someone can access support from a service. Evidence gathered at the webinar session exposed how gatekeeping is an issue that most asylum seekers face. According to the Govan Community Project 'Most asylum seekers feel like beggars... they feel that they need to accept everything, but this should not be the case.' The project recognises that it is important to respect and value the choices of the individual: 'if someone wants to eat ten pasta dishes, for example, why not? They should be able to.' People should be given the dignity to choose the food they need.

- **Training for staff and volunteers**

The key to providing a dignified experience for asylum seekers is improving knowledge around the asylum system and the experience of asylum seekers navigating the 'ongoing emergency' of life characterised by poverty and destitution. Evidence from the Govan Community Project showed that it is not uncommon for asylum seekers to experience underlying attitudes from staff that can be summed up as 'beggars can't be choosers,' and that asking for more is felt to be 'greedy.' Experiences vary a lot from person to person, but it is felt that best practice should be consistent and that staff attitudes - both verbal and non-verbal - should always work to enhance the dignity of the individual. Lack of awareness about different cultural and religious practices and preferences means that people's needs are overlooked and excluded. Training on the asylum system and NRPf status, as well as on cultural and religious dietary practice and anti-racist best practice, can all help to improve the experience of the service user.

- **Share knowledge and information**

When many people first enter into the asylum system, they may not be aware of what a food bank or a food pantry is and tend to learn this from word of mouth. Their housing provider may not tell them what local support is available and how to access it. Working to make this information clear and available is important. Food providers can make sure that key support agencies are aware of them, such as Housing providers, GPs, and social workers.

- **Promoting 'dignity in practice'**

Gokhan (Brighter Futures), spoke on the matter of dignity in emergency food provision, stating that 'the quality and amount of food matter.' Often, even though asylum seekers come from different cultures and beliefs, with different dietary requirements, 'they are given the same food and sometimes very little choice.' More dignified ways of providing food aid, such as providing vouchers for groceries, so people can choose their own food, and distributing household essentials to support cooking can allow people to be more independent and have an enhanced sense of dignity, especially families with children: 'Parents should be able to cook whatever they want for their children, and make their families feel like they are home.' Other practical changes food providers can make to help promote a dignified experience including avoiding queuing and long waiting times, and giving people time to choose their items.

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- **Support or signpost people to help them meet other basic needs**

Tandy Nicole from Govan Community Project emphasised the importance of addressing the competing needs of clients by supporting digital connectivity with devices and phone top ups, and providing clothing and bus vouchers, where needed. Other food providers described distributing an initial support package 'including a smart mobile, clothing and shoes, and other basic household items' in response to the circumstances of their clients, many of whom are 'housed at a distance from local amenities and have to walk for hours to the town centre and back home. They have to make a choice between food or a bus pass.'

3. What policy changes need to be made to ensure that migrant communities in the UK are not pushed into destitution?

The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed the inequality and poverty experienced by migrant communities and made clear the role of NRPF in creating poverty and destitution. An estimated 1.4 million people, including over 175,000 children, have limited leave to remain or are on a visa and have No Recourse to Public Funds. Below we set out a series of policy recommendations to improve the financial and social security of migrant communities proposed by participants and attendees of the June webinar. These range from high-level structural to small-scale logistical recommendations.

- **Allowing the right to work (without restrictions or conditions, such as only specialised jobs)**

Currently people that are seeking asylum in the UK can only apply for the right to work after waiting for a decision on their case for over a year. And still then, few people who are given permission are able to work due to the restriction on this being limited to a list of highly skilled professions. According to a survey of people seeking asylum in the UK from the Lift the Ban campaign, 72% of respondents had not known prior to arriving in the UK that they would not be allowed to work [6]. Gokhan, an expert by experience from Brighter Futures, explained how allowing the right to work would have a positive impact on mental health and would help people to feel part of the community - rather than 'staying in limbo for months or years.' Furthermore, Lift the Ban has argued that giving people seeking asylum the right to work, has strong public support - with 71% in favour.

- **Access to public funds, e.g. Universal Credit**

Public funds such as Universal Credit, unemployment support and child benefits, which exist to support people who need them in order to reduce hardship and poverty in the UK, should be inclusive to asylum seekers, refugees and migrants who we know are often at risk of poverty and destitution due to their exclusion from mainstream state support. Third sector worker Béatrice Humarau, shared the precariousness of the lives of the people using their service in Norwich. 'People from migrant backgrounds with the right to work are more likely to be in insecure employment with 0-hour contracts and low income jobs.' The pandemic introduced additional difficulties, such as the added expense of children at home, exacerbating food insecurity among an already vulnerable group. Béatrice also gave testimony on women from migrant backgrounds with children under 5, who use their service: some 'may not have had anyone look after the children to get to work when nurseries closed down. Those who have limited English and digital skills found it difficult to communicate with their employer who showed little understanding of the situation and sent them their P45 without any prior communication on their part.' She added that 'the complexity of the welfare benefits system impacted on their ability to claim welfare benefits, resulting in increased food insecurity.' Making grants available and accessible to all people who need them is a vital step toward eliminating the need for emergency food provision.

- **Reducing the time asylum claims take to reach a decision**

The Home Office states that an asylum seeker will receive a decision on their claim within six months, however there are thousands of people who wait years for a decision. As of March 2021, three quarters of people waiting for a decision on their asylum claim had been waiting for over six months [7]. One volunteer researcher in Govan Community Project's Food for All group waited 9 years before being granted Leave to Remain.

- **Allow asylum seekers to have a UK bank account**

Lack of access to a UK bank account, stops people in need from accessing local funds. For example, last year, Glasgow City Council distributed short-term winter grants for people who had children within a specific age group. Many

asylum seekers were, however, unable to access these funds due to the absence of a bank account. The webinar heard about asylum seekers who are students and were unable to receive discretionary funds from colleges and institutions because of this.

- **Increasing the amount of Home Office support**

Currently there is a disconnect between the amount of support provided for asylum seekers and mainstream welfare benefits. Whilst, of course, both are too low for a person to live a dignified life, asylum support must at least be increased so that it is in line with mainstream social security payments.

- **Change the restrictions on types of support (e.g. section 4 cashless, using Aspen card online)**

At the moment the new Aspen cards now allow people to make contactless payments, however, people are still not able to use these online. Section 4 Support is restricted to card payments only and cash cannot be withdrawn using the card, which means that often asylum seekers cannot shop at smaller retailers which only accept cash, which is often the case with shops selling culturally diverse foods. This raises a number of concerns around people's dignity and choice, as well as the ability for people who are having to self-isolate due to Covid-19 to order grocery deliveries online.

- **Free bus passes**

The cost of public transport is a major barrier for asylum seekers and contributes to food insecurity. Free or discounted bus passes are available for some vulnerable groups, such as older people or disabled people, however there are no discounts available for asylum seekers. Testimony from the Govan Community Project stated that, in theory, asylum seekers can get an HC2 certificate when going to the hospital to claim travel expenses. However, reports from the ground have shown that, for most asylum seekers, when they go to a hospital they are unable to claim reimbursement. There needs to be accountability on this issue; if policy states that asylum seekers are entitled to free travel expenses for hospital appointments, this need to be reflected in practice.

- **Emergency welfare grants**

Crisis grants should be available to all, so that in situations like that of earlier in the year, when thousands of Aspen cards stopped working, people can be prepared and still afford food and essentials for themselves and their families.

- **Holding the Home Office contractors to account**

Organisations with contracts to provide support or accommodation to asylum seekers need to be held to account in order to ensure they provide the service for which they are contracted. Asylum accommodation is often found to be substandard, with issues relating to damp, insect infestations, as well as unsuitability. [8]

An example of this is the Mother and Baby Unit in Glasgow, opened by the Home Office accommodation provider Mears. The spaces consist of just 'one small room, with the cot just steps away from the cooker and a window that barely opens.' [9] The Govan Community Project is part of the Freedom to Crawl campaign, which seeks to end the use of sub-standard/privatised asylum and refugee accommodation.

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- **Free school meals for all children**

Universal free school meals would ensure that all children receive a nutritious and balanced meal during term time. Universality would reduce stigma associated with free school meals and ensure that no children in need slip through the cracks due to conditionality. Universal free school meals would also provide the opportunity for well-paid jobs in the local community for catering staff as well as an opportunity to support local farmers.

- **Provision of internet as a standard in asylum seeker accommodation**

Access to the internet is not a luxury but rather a basic need and this has been highlighted during the Covid-19 pandemic as many support services went online only, as did schooling and support groups. No one should have to make the choice between paying for internet data for their children to attend class or food.

- **Right to food**

There needs to be a comprehensive, rights-based approach to tackling food insecurity faced by migrant communities, and part of this approach needs to include better legal protections of the right to food in order to provide a framework for the progressive realisation of this fundamental right. We hope that the UK Government follows the example of the Scottish Government in their pledge to create a new human rights bill that incorporates our socio-economic rights including the Right to Food [10].

Conclusion

Migrant communities are currently being failed by the government and are poorly served by some food providers. A history of racist immigration policy in the UK has culminated in a policy environment in which migrant communities and asylum seekers live in poverty and experience food insecurity.

There are clear policy options for addressing the destitution that many migrant communities currently experience, not least suspending NRP status and increasing the amount of Home Office financial support available to asylum seekers. Food aid providers have an important role to play in, not only joining movements for policy change, but in making the day-to-day experience of migrant communities dignified and secure. This can be achieved by ensuring the availability of culturally appropriate food, by removing all gatekeeping, and by talking to those using their services to understand how they can best meet their needs – whether by providing a mobile phone, a bus pass, assisting with access to the internet or distributing shopping vouchers.

Above all, recommendations for change to policy and to food aid provision need to be developed in conjunction with people with lived experience of migration and seeking asylum.

Acknowledgement

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For further information please contact admin@foodaidnetwork.org.uk

Endnotes

- [1] Jolly, A., Dickson, E., Garande, K., Richmond-Bishop, I. & Singh, J. (2021) *Immigration Policies: Enforcing Borders, Driving Hunger and Creating Destitution*. Wolverhampton: ICRD
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- [3] 'A Lifeline for All' on Children and Families with No Recourse to Public Funds (2020): www.childrenssociety.org.uk/information/professionals/resources/lifeline-for-all p.2
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- [5] Thousands of asylum seekers left unable to afford food as financial support stops www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/asylum-seekers-home-office-aspen-cards-b1854401.html
- [6] <https://www.refugee-action.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Lift-The-Ban-Common-Sense.pdf>
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