Beyond Food Provision: Understanding Community Growing in the Context of Food Poverty

Roberta Sonnino

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-Munford, 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, 2013: 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, 2013; 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 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.

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, 2013; 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 & 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 & 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 are becoming increasingly politicized. The literature points in particular to community gardening, an umbrella term that includes a range of practices (from small-scale farming to growing activities for socially excluded people) that share in common a community-led organization (Pinkerton and Hopkins, 2009). Unlike allotments, community gardens are grassroots-driven and, at least in their most ideological or pure state, are established as regeneration projects on urban waste-land (McKay, 2011). Their most extreme form, guerrilla gardening, has been described as "a battle for resources, a battle against scarcity of land, environmental abuse and wasted opportunities" (Reynolds, 2008: 5).

The community-based nature of urban gardens has triggered academic debates about their relationship with the dominant political and governance context. For Pudup (2008), for example, community gardens become projects to support the state and sustain the social order in times of crisis. Tornaghi (2014) highlights the tendency to use these initiatives as justification for the privatization of the public realm and disinvestment in disadvantaged neighborhoods. Similarly, DeLind (2014) argues that community gardens in the USA are often reduced to mechanisms for overcoming deficits – a tool for fixing problems.

Clearly, community gardens inherit some contradictions when it comes to their radical stance and neoliberal connections. In discussing such contradictions in relation to urban agriculture activities, McClintock (2014) maintains that, despite their emergence as a radical counter-movement to the capitalist agri-food system, these projects are entangled in processes of neo-liberalization. In this respect, for some academics there are important similarities between urban food growing and the food bank model: they are both an outcome of financial cuts and the expansion of neo-liberal policy. As Barron (2016: 6) points out, community gardens, like food banks, associate hunger with consumers' inability to procure sufficient food and strive to help them cope with their circumstances by transforming themselves, rather than their situations.

In contrast with this ambivalent stance, many studies have emphasized the benefits of community gardening (especially community food growing), outlining the contours of a development model that seems to address many of the criticisms raised against food banks. Milbourne's (2012) analysis of community garden projects in disadvantaged neighborhoods, for example, shows how these practices can become important drivers of social capital in urban spaces. Green and Phillips (2013) have noted that urban gardens promote food security amongst the poor and serve an important function in teaching school children about nutrition and the environment. A study on the impacts of community gardens on Hispanic families in rural Oregon suggests that they can strengthen family relationships and increase the vegetable intake of participants (Carney et al., 2012). Research in Baltimore has emphasized the positive impact of gardening on the food habits of the urban poor and on their environment – in the form of increased safety and community cohesion (Poulsen et al., 2014). Along similar lines, Rishbeth (2005) noted the cultural benefits of gardening in

ethnically diverse areas, where participants cultivate herbs and vegetables native to their home countries. For Hale et al. (2011), gardening plays an important role in reconnecting people (especially children) with the ecological processes embedded in the production of food – and, more broadly, with nature.

Theoretically, these studies are pointing to the need to recognize the transformative potential of food-growing initiatives – their scope to enact a food "politics of the possible" (Gibson-Graham, 2006; see also Blay-Palmer et al., 2016). Ideally, community food growing engenders three main types of transformations. It challenges old cultural views of the city as the consumer, introducing a form of productive land use that helps urban areas struggling with decay and an unhealthy food environment. It contrasts the individualization of hunger through the establishment of new relations of solidarity. And it returns agency to marginalized people, rather than treating them as mouths to be fed. Pushing this argument to the extreme, Hodgkinson (2005: 67) states:

> "In this sense, then, digging is literally anarchy. It is anarchy in action. Anarchy consists in essentially ignoring the state and the empty promises of democracy. It consists in refusing to give up your authority to an external party. It means refusing to wait until governments 'sort it out', and it means starting to sort things out for yourself".

To enhance understanding of the transformative capacity of community food growing in the context of food poverty, this paper asks: How, and to what extent, can food-growing initiatives contribute to the immediate issue of food poverty? Is their contribution oppositional, alternative or complementary to that provided by the food bank model? Do community food growing projects respond to the complexities of food poverty beyond the provision of food, and, if so, how?

Researching Community Food Growing: Context and Methodology

Our research focused on the UK, a country where food poverty and the use of food banks have risen at an unprecedented rate over recent years. In 2013-14, to give an idea, the three main food aid providers (The Trussell Trust, Fareshare and Food Cycle) in the country delivered more than 20 million meals (The Trussell Trust, 2015).

The magnitude of the British crisis has been explained in relation to the recession, public finance austerity and welfare reform (Lambie-Mumford, 2015) as well as, more broadly, to the heavy reliance of the UK's food system on industrialized agriculture and international trading (Dowler et al., 2011), which makes it very vulnerable to global shocks. Indeed, between 2005 and 2013 food prices in the UK increased by more than 43 per cent (Cooper et al., 2014), hitting Britain's poorest households especially hard. According to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Hunger and Food Poverty, which compared the situation in advanced economies between 2003 and 2013, the UK had the highest rate of general inflation, experienced the highest inflation in food, fuel and housing and lost the highest number of manufacturing jobs – all within a context

characterized by a static average wage and a very large proportion of low-paid workers (Field et al., 2014).

At the national level, in the UK a lack of "ownership" for the food poverty issue (Lambie-Mumford, 2015) has translated into a widespread political acceptance of the food bank model. As Dowler and Lambie-Mumford (2015b: 426) note, this is not a policy context that enables the "critical thinking and creative imagination" that the current crisis would demand. Wales, where over 85,000 people (including 30,000 children) used food banks in 2014-15 (Cooper et al., 2014), is an illustrative example of this political atrophy.

Existing policies explicitly support food growing as a community development strategy in Wales. The Community Grown Food Action Plan, for example, urges local authorities to map out land under their ownership that could be utilized to "increase the availability of locally grown horticultural produce, improve health and well being and increase the number of people interested in growing food in Wales" (Welsh Government, 2010: 56). The Welsh Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens emphasizes the importance of exchanging knowledge and good practice to support growing initiatives (Tyfu Pobl, 2015) as a means to develop sustainable communities (CLAS Cymru, 2015). As yet, however, no explicit connection has been made in Wales between food poverty and community food growing.

Early signs of change are emerging locally, particularly in Cardiff, a city that is explicitly committed to develop a more sustainable and resilient urban food system. Cardiff's 10-year strategy, for example, advocates increased local food production as a means to create a sustainable "Carbon Lite" city (Cardiff Council, 2011). The "amount of space provided for allotments and/or community growing" is one of the indicators included in Cardiff's Local Development Plan (Cardiff Council, 2013: 68). The right for each urban community to have "access to a wide range of growing, cooking activities, land, buildings and other resources that enable them to take more control of their food" (Powell, 2013: 2) is a central principle of the Cardiff Food Charter, a vision for the future that the city has been trying to implement through the working of a Food Council. Established in 2012 to bring together representatives from the city's main public organizations, businesses and charities, the Council has driven Cardiff towards the achievement of a "Bronze Sustainable Food City"[1] status in 2015 (Food Cardiff, 2015). Significantly, the application states plans to develop community gardens in each neighborhood of the city to promote horticultural training and the use of "meanwhile" leases to enable communities to make the most of temporarily available spaces (Food Cardiff, 2014).

Our research focused on South Wales, a region that includes several areas that are officially classed as "deprived" under the Welsh Index of Multiple

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[1] This is a UK-wide initiative of the Sustainable Food Cities Network, a cross-sectoral partnership of local public agencies, NGOs and businesses that work together to make healthy and sustainable food a characteristic of their city (see http://sustainablefoodcities.org).

Deprivation[2]. The selection process of our case studies provided immediate and relevant insights into the character of community food growing initiatives in Wales. Initially, we aimed to identify community gardens in their "purest" form: relatively informal spaces on unused land dedicated to gardening activities. However, identifying such projects proved very difficult. Indeed, while the character of the initiatives would arguably be defined within the criteria of a community garden, they are formally run by organizations working with vulnerable members of society within confined areas that are not openly accessible to the whole public. The garden is, at least initially, used as a point of engagement for the organizations, which, with their presence and involvement, have managed to avoid the issues related to the instability of land tenure that is often associated with community gardens.

Due to the nature of the research, which focused on specific subjects (in this case, community gardens and their members) rather than a whole community or population, the case studies were non-randomised and chosen specifically on the basis of their characteristics and diversity. Specifically, we selected four initiatives that have developed in different contexts: two in the more enabling policy environment of the capital city, the other two in areas that have no food policy in place. This choice of case studies enhanced opportunities for comparison also in terms of geographical character of these initiatives, since three of them are located in urban contexts (the capital city of Cardiff and the smaller city of Newport), whereas the third has emerged in a rural county (Torfaen).

To reflect the bottom-up, community-based nature of community gardens, we adopted an interpretive research approach, which recognizes reality as socially constructed, giving prominence to the social, cultural, historical or individual contexts in which people's experiences are situated (Hennink et al., 2011). Under this type of approach, the researcher's positionality is clearly an influential component of the research process. This was a particular concern before and during the research, given the vulnerability of the interviewees: refugees whose first language is not English; people with mental health issues or physical disabilities; individuals who are experiencing financial difficulties. To minimize the potential impact that the research might have had on such vulnerable people, particular attention was paid to personal aspects such as mannerism, language and appearance, as well as the overall stance of the research. For example, the male researcher avoided making direct contact with refugee women who have had very little interaction with men outside of their families, requesting the presence or support of other female gardeners.

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[2] This is the Government's official measure of relative deprivation for small areas in Wales. It is designed to identify those small areas where there are the highest concentrations of several different types of deprivation. The Index is currently made up of eight domains that relate to both material and social aspects of deprivation. As officially defined by the Welsh Government, the latter refers to an individual's inability to participate in the normal social life of the community; material deprivation, in turn, involves "having insufficient physical resources – food, shelter, and clothing – necessary to sustain a certain standard of life" (Welsh Government, 2014).

The four case studies included three allotments and a vegetable box scheme. Specifically, the *Taff Housing Association Community Allotment* was started in 2011 in one of the most deprived areas of west Cardiff, following a meeting in which tenants expressed their desire for food growing space. The allotment is located in a quiet area only accessible through locked gates that gardeners can utilize at their convenience and free of charge. As the community investment officer described it, the garden provides

> *multiple benefits for people's health; being outside, growing their own fruit and veg... A lot of our tenants are on limited incomes, so to be able to grow their own produce is a big help for some families and individuals.*

The garden itself is rented by the housing association from the Cardiff Council and it comprises a large tract of land (the equivalent of five individual allotments), divided between the tenants and two patches for community groups. Overall, there are around sixteen tenants using the allotment, not including the two community groups. The garden is well equipped with a large communal/training shed, a composting toilet, a storage shed and a large polytunnel. The allotment mostly consists of raised beds, where gardeners grow vegetables, herbs, fruit and flowers.

Women Connect First Allotment, also in Cardiff, is managed by an organization that works with black and ethnic minority women across disadvantaged and isolated communities in southeast Wales. Its first allotment was established in 2008 in Cardiff East; more recently, the organization has created a small plot as part of the Taff Housing Association's community allotment space. The garden, which is rented from the council for a very small amount (£10-20 a year), is only accessible to the beneficiaries, who work together to grow food in raised beds and cultivated borders and, more broadly, to strengthen social inclusion and community cohesion. As explained by the Director:

> *Women over fifty, from all different cultures, [...] come to this country [...] with their husbands here, and were bringing up the kids, the kids have grown up, and then the husband left them [...] and now they are left without any English, any skills [...]. So we build their confidence, build their skills, for them to become independent.*

The *Duffryn Allotment* is situated in the old laundry area of a historic (17th century) building of west Newport. The garden, which started in 2013 once the National Trust took over the property from the Council, is currently managed by Duffryn Community Link, in collaboration with the National Trust and Growing Space (a mental health charity that provides therapeutic training and horticultural expertise). This project targets the most vulnerable in the community, teaching volunteers from the local area to work together to grow food in the raised beds and borders. As one participant described it, the allotment is an important resource for people who have been affected by welfare changes such as benefit sanctions and the "bedroom tax":

When our children were gone, we were going to have to start paying the bedroom tax, we got the spare room. I know it's only £ 12.50 a week and it doesn't sound much, but that £ 25 a fortnight is quite a lot. I could buy better food.

The *Garnsychan Partnership's Veg Box* is an initiative introduced by a registered charity dedicated to community-based social, environmental and economic regeneration in the former coal-mining rural area of Torfaen. As described by the volunteer coordinator:

It is an ex-coal mining area and obviously with the change from that industry there are problems like high unemployment, high levels of poverty, antisocial behavior etc. [...] A few people just got together and said: we want to set something up and try to improve the community and address some of these issues; and really it's just grown and grown from there.

The Veg Box was initially established to encourage local people to eat fresh fruit and vegetables by growing and selling fresh produce. The organization had previously delivered products to the local area, but financial restraints have forced them to operate primarily through an on-site, pop-up shop once a week. This scheme utilizes produce (around 25% of the total) provided by the garden itself, which involves 10-15 volunteer gardeners from the local area. The remainder of the produce in the Veg Box is sourced from local wholesalers.

Data collection methods involved both formal and informal interviews as well as field observations. Interviews with the organizers of the projects, which were arranged in advance of the first visit, were semi-structured around themes that aimed to provide a detailed background to the initiative. Specifically, we focused our questions on the organization, structuring and funding arrangements in place; the purpose and goals of the project; its perceived benefits; and the barriers (past, present or future) to its development.

Interviews with gardeners were more informal, aiming to capture their direct experience of being involved in the initiative. While contact was already made with the organizers in advance of the interviews, the interviews with the gardeners were random and depended upon their interest and availability. This informal approach often facilitated natural group discussions, which provided conditions for inclusive research but did not facilitate conversations on sensitive topics, which we only covered through face-to-face individual interviews with available gardeners.

Central to all group and individual interviews was the relationship of the individual and the garden with the organization, with the food banks and with the changing political environment. Slight adjustments were made after each interview to explore issues that were presenting themselves throughout. As Hennink et al. (2011) state, making such "inductive references" is an important step to deepen the issues to be covered in the following interviews, until an eventual point of information saturation is achieved.

In total, we interviewed 7 organizers, 13 gardeners and one representative from the Welsh Government. Each interview was recorded to a digital Dictaphone through an attached lapel microphone, allowing for the outdoor conditions. During the visits to the gardens, observations were also recorded. In some cases, the researcher was invited to work alongside the gardeners, which helped provide an informal and relaxed setting for interviewing the gardeners and observe their activities and interaction. Notes from these observations were later integrated with more in-depth notes based upon further observation and afterthoughts. When available, secondary material provided by the projects was also collected and later analyzed in relation to the main research questions.

Community Food Gardens as Spaces of Engagement

As described above, the four case studies represent a hybrid of a community garden and an allotment. Spatially, they resemble allotments; socially, they provide a rich community resource. Indeed, in many ways, the four projects can be characterized as non-institutionalized referral agencies. As described by the manager of the Garnsychan partnership:

> It's supposed to be people coming along, doing their job search, and they've got staff to support them and help them with their CV and stuff.

This function of community growing spaces seems to be especially important for the hard to reach members of society. According to the organizer of the Duffryn Allotment, for example:

> We get people in and [...] it's very much hand-holding and taking them to the right service. Or just through a little conversation while we're weeding or a cuppa tea, it's like: 'what's going on'?

Food provision is widely seen as an important vehicle for reaching out the most marginalized individuals. In the case of the Duffryn Allotment, this was one of the primary reasons for starting the garden:

> It was originally called 'plant to plate' because we wanted to get people who live in poverty [...] and those that are hardest to reach [...] looking at how they can grow their own food, and then healthy eating comes as well, and how it all links together.

For many participants, though, the benefits provided by these growing spaces are more immaterial, and have to do with the acquisition of new skills and of liberating feelings of ownership, independence and freedom. As the manager of the Duffryn Allotment explained:

> It's somewhere safe, [...] it's relaxed. You can come here, there are always workers you can talk to if you've got an issue, and also it's that sense of involvement as well. I mean, some people who come here probably haven't

> *come to anything regularly, but they do the allotment and they have a sense of ownership.*

The opportunities for empowerment and inclusion provided by the gardens were widely emphasized by our interviewees when they described their personal transformation since joining the project. A gardener at the Duffryn Allotment highlighted:

> *The garden gives me a sense of respect, really, knowledge of how things are grown, you can prepare your own garden, you can lead your life the way you should.*

It is important to note, however, that these initiatives do not position themselves outside of the dominant socio-economic system. In all, their fundamental objective is to re-connect people with the wider community – socially and economically. The Garnsychan Partnership, for instance, sees the training it provides as an important "stepping-stone" to gain the skills and confidence needed to access the job market. In recalling the recent times when the project provided a small financial help to people "who really needed crisis support", its manager pointed out:

> *It was usually just five or ten pounds, just to tide them over. It was with the condition that they'd be supported by Communities First […] and would have to go and have budgeting advice. […] We asked them to do something to try and improve their situation and make sure they weren't just getting a sort of hand out, I guess.*

In this respect, we encountered several successful examples during our research. This included, for instance, a gardener who started his own landscaping business as a result of his involvement with the Garnsychan Partnership; a participant in the Duffryn Allotment, who became employed in the tearooms of Tredegar House; and a lady from Pakistan who is employed 10 hours per week to run the Women Connect First allotment – a job, she stressed, that has given her an opportunity to utilize the skills she had acquired by working on a farm in her native country.

Our research shows that there are two main aspects of community growing initiatives that help to explain their character and value as engagement tools. The first is their informality, which is key to attract participants to these initiatives, as the community engagement officer at the National Trust explained:

> *They can access mental health services or anything for a bit of advice, and 'cause it's quite informal it's not like going to an office, it's completely different. It can be incidental. So it's easier for people to have a conversation.*

In addition to facilitating the involvement of disadvantaged people, the informality of these initiatives is also instrumental to foster learning. The

Coordinator at Growing Space highlighted the peculiar role of garden-based training:

> *We get people who come to this project, they'll do training, they'll meet new people, and they'll really open up through the garden and through being engaged through the green spaces. Whereas if you put them straight into the classroom, with people they don't know, they sort of go into their shells, they get a bit intimidated, and they just leave the class and don't go back.*

The second main feature of community gardens as informal spaces of engagement is their close connections with relevant organizations (such as Communities First, Keep Wales Tidy, the Wales Council for Voluntary Action and Growing Space) and government agencies. Such connections are particularly explicit in the case of the Garnsychan Partnership:

> *If support organizations like [...] social services [...] encounter people who are struggling, they might refer them to us [...] for some support. We also work with schools, to try and get young people involved.*

The networked character of these initiatives emerged quite strongly during discussions on food. For example, the Taff Housing Association and Duffryn Allotment run cooperatives alongside the project, providing fresh fruit, vegetables and salad bags for an affordable price. Tenants at the housing association who volunteer their services can accumulate time bank credit and use it to pay for cooperative produce.

The intended benefits of food growing activities target not just single individuals but also their communities. The Garnsychan Partnership, for example, operates its garden as a social enterprise that aims to reach people who lack access to healthy food in the area:

> *For people in this area, the only shop they have easy access to is the co-op [...]. Unless you're prepared to travel to the nearest town, but then you've got the cost of travel as well.*

Each garden distributes the food in different ways. Some share the freshly picked produce amongst the gardeners, while Women Connect First encourages participants to cook and eat together, celebrating each other's culture with food from different countries once a week. Significantly, community food growing initiatives do not operate as separate from (or in opposition to) the food bank model. The Garnsychan Partnership, for instance, is able to offer emergency food when needed:

> *Last year, we did run a project, funded by the Welsh Government, it was just called the crisis project, and it was for people who really had no money at all. So they would come in and we'd give them a free bag and it would be supplemented with other stuff. We did fruit and veg and salad, but we'd also have tins.*

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Practically, the relationship between community food growing and the charity food system varies in formality and scope. The Garnsychan Partnership and Duffryn Allotment both distribute food bank vouchers. On the grounds of Tredegar House, the Trussell Trust runs a food bank. At the gardening session, one volunteer asked for (and received) a food parcel simply by mentioning that they were short on food for the week. In addition, other members of the allotment run a food bank in the area.

Connections with the food banks seem to enhance the character of food growing spaces as engagement tools, since charity food organizations often act as a point of entry to the community garden project. Many gardeners we interviewed are still regularly accessing food banks, to which they associate feelings that stand in stark contrast with the sense of pride attached to growing their own food. As a gardener at the Garnsychan Partnership described it:

> *You go to the food bank and you feel degraded 'cause you've had to go down there. Whereas when you're growing your own stuff, it teaches you how to grow and you take it back to your own house [...] and then you've got the pride of yours.*

Similarly, a participant in the Duffryn Allotment stated:

> *With a food bank, we appreciate all the food from over there, but [...] this is a lot healthier. You watch it grow yourself and then you respect it and appreciate it more.*

As one of the employees of the Garnsychan Partnership emphasized:

> *I think people do get a bit embarrassed if they need to ask for help. They do it themselves then, it gives them independence, it's a skill they can use for as long as they like.*

The long-term benefits of food-growing activities were clearly highlighted by participants. A gardener at the Garnsychan Partnership allotment explained:

> *Going to the food bank, you can only go there once. Whereas if you grow your own, you can go there time after time [...], year after year, and it's not costing you any extra money. Once you've planted, you just reap the rewards hopefully for years and years to come.*

Some of the long-term benefits associated with community food growing spaces are related to the gaining of knowledge and skills, more than financial and tangible rewards. A representative from Growing Spaces noted:

> *We've sort of noticed that a lot of the people coming over here feed their children a lot healthier now. They're more aware now that things like Coke [...] and burgers and crisps are not the thing you want to be feeding your child. And they take pride now in growing things and actually feeding their child the crops that they grow.*

The awareness of healthy eating and cooking, combined with a desire of not wasting food that took time and effort to grow, seems to have implications on local eating habits that, as the representative from the National Trust pointed out, should not be underestimated:

> *It helps people eat seasonally and it also helps them to understand the cooking, so getting vegetables and [...] making soup is actually really easy. [...] If just one person here starts eating healthier, it's a success. It can make a massive difference to someone's life in such a small way.*

Addressing Food Poverty through Growing Initiatives: An Analysis

At the most immediate level, community food growing initiatives do not seem to have a significant transformative potential in relation to food poverty. The fact that many gardeners continue to rely on food banks brings to light the limited scale of these projects, which is indeed a severe restraint on their capacity to provide enough food for the poor at times of crisis.

At the same time, community gardens, like food banks, de-politicize the problem of food poverty, at least to some extent. As we described, several project coordinators emphasized the role of gardening in building individual healthy eating skills. Implicit in this narrative is the idea that the poor lacks food knowledge – an assumption that has been criticized for diverting attention away from the core causes of food poverty. As Barron (2016: 6) has recently argued, "a focus on enabling consumers to eat better risks conflating charitable activities with political action", obscuring the role of the State in fostering, or failing to mitigate, the conditions that produce food poverty.

In reality, however, there is one fundamental difference between food banks and community gardens: the nature and level of their intervention. Food banks essentially individualize food poverty, framing the poor as a victim in need of emergency support to survive the hardships of yet another economic crisis. Community food growing initiatives, in turn, operate at both the individual and the community level. Like food banks, they target single individuals caught in the cyclical fight against food poverty, but through their emphasis on transferrable knowledge and skills (rather than emergency aid), they prioritize the longer-term benefits that healthy eating and cooking skills can offer to the gardeners and their families.

Another key element that distinguishes community food growing initiatives from food banks is their networked character. Unlike food banks, community gardens do not confine their operations to the provision of food, nor is the latter restricted to growing activities. As described, each project has close relationships with other food providers (including cooperatives, independent schemes and even food banks), acting as a sort of "food hub" for people who do not have easy physical access to fresh produce. At the same time, all projects we researched are

embedded into a wider network of both community organizations and governmental services. Their functioning and, at times, their very existence depend on the relations that develop within this network, as the Community Engagement Officer from the National Trust explained:

> *The Trust had the land and were willing to give the land, there was a community need and that organization [Community First] was really good at bringing people in, and then there was [Growing Space's] expertise with the gardening. [...] If the Welsh Government hadn't set up Communities First, none of these people would have been here. [...] So it's a really good example of how Government can change people's lives with the correct people in place and the correct projects.*

Importantly, with the only exception of the Garnsychan Partnership, which, as a social enterprise, generates income from a range of projects, the gardens are also dependent on their network for funding and volunteers. Every organizer identified this type of arrangement as the main barrier to the long-term sustainability of these projects. As the manager of the Garnsychan Partnership explained:

> *So many services are being cut that everyone is kind of going after the same pot of money. So that's not something we want to be relying on, really. It needs to be self-sustaining.*

This quote takes us back to one of the key concerns raised by academics working on community growing schemes, which are often criticized as evidence of neo-liberal governments' tendency to shift the responsibility for solving social problems to local communities – what Peck and Tickell (2002) would call a deliberate "roll out" of neo-liberal governance. While this may well be the case in the UK (see, for example, Sonnino and Griggs-Trevarthen, 2013), it should be noted that, in our example, the re-scaling of responsibility does not coincide with the State's withdrawal from the social welfare arena. As described, in South Wales community food growing initiatives operate in tandem not just with other civil society organizations, but also with government's agencies.

Through this networked approach, community gardens respond to the issue of food poverty in a flexible and creative manner. In other words, they manage to engage with its multi-dimensional character, moving beyond the immediate level of food provision. The stories we collected in the gardens show that while income is certainly a determining factor of an individual's or household's capacity to access healthy food, the experience of food poverty is also compounded by the interplay of social and cultural dynamics that create a situation of multiple deprivations. In South Wales, food poverty evokes issues as diverse as migration, gender discrimination, mental health problems, low levels of education, and lack of social and professional skills. In this context, the transformative potential of food-growing projects is in their capacity to situate food within a wider poverty context and to engage with the latter through collaborative relations that involve other key policy and social actors.

For those who suffer from oppression and exclusion from the public sphere, the garden offers not just an informal, safe and welcoming space; it also provides social and educational services that can be tailored to their individual needs. In this sense, the food growing initiatives in this study evoke the idea of a "food bank plus" model proposed by the All-Party Parliamentary Inquiry into Hunger in the UK, which would help to tackle both the causes and the symptoms of food poverty by providing advice, skills and advocacy services (Field et al., 2014).

In sum, contrary to their appearance as bounded and individualized spaces, community food gardens are material *and* emotional spaces of social and economic engagement – in other words, places where, as Barron (2016: 9) points out, belonging or fitting in is not dependent upon the ability (or lack of) to purchase food. In contrast with food bank users, gardeners acquire the capacity of seeing themselves as members of a wider community (with all the rights and responsibilities that this entails), sharing access to resources (green space, healthy food, educational and social services) that are frequently denied to the poor and that the gardens are striving to mobilize. In this sense, community gardens maybe embryonic embodiments of Featherstone et al.'s (2012: 179) "progressive localism" -- an outward-looking form of localism, based on positive affinities between places and social groups negotiating global processes, that attempts to reconfigure existing communities around emergent agendas for social justice, participation and tolerance. As Morgan (2015: 296) has recently pointed out, making "good food" available and affordable is one of the surest ways of keeping these progressive values alive.

Towards A Place-Based Approach to Food Poverty: Some Conclusions

Community gardens provide an important focus to expand the debate on food poverty beyond materiality (i.e., the lack of financial resources to access healthy food) and away from the individualization of hunger – the two core aspects of the food bank model. Our exploratory research shows that food-growing initiatives are embedded into horizontal (spatial) and vertical (policy) networks that engage with different dimensions of the food poverty crisis – from lack of employment to ethnic marginalization and from gender discrimination to low levels of social and educational capital.

Clearly, community gardens do not have the capacity to re-dress these macro-level socio-economic and political dynamics. Their transformative potential is linked to their capacity to assemble a more collective response to the specific combinations of materiality, practices and meanings that global dynamics always create – in a word, to their place-based approach to food poverty. In Wales, food-growing initiatives are indeed creating new places of possibility for communities to reconnect around progressive values of participation and inclusion. Such places, it is important to mention, are not developing in opposition to the mainstream socio-economic and institutional context; rather, they emerge *within* it – as complementary alternatives to charity food systems.

The formation of networks of actors or "actor-spaces" (Murdoch and Marsden, 1995) associated with community gardens brings into focus new constellations of activities and sectors of intervention, highlighting the need for a more joined-up approach to food poverty. This may entail, for example, a wider use of policy councils as a platform to bring together health and social services, local businesses and the private sector and develop a more integrated food policy agenda.

Theoretically, community food gardens remind us that "place" is a very important prism to build far more diversity and complexity into generalized interpretations of (and responses to) food poverty (Sonnino et al., in press). Place-based progress in re-assembling food access is clearly embedded in, and driven by, context-dependent concerns for food poverty. But it could also link to wider "translocal assemblages" – composites of place-based social movements that exchange ideas, knowledge, practices and resources (McFarlane, 2009; Levkoe and Wakefield, 2014). Joined into trans-local networks that "connect grassroots change-makers" (Barron, 2016: 13), community gardens can help expand simplistic definitions of food poverty to one that includes an acknowledgment of deeper structural issues of exclusion and an understanding of the cyclical and interconnected nature of many of those issues. More broadly, and importantly perhaps, we are beginning to witness in the community gardens the emergence of a more collective political sensitivity that re-connects food with wider sets of public goods and recognizes people's status as holders of both individual *and* collective rights.

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