

GRASSROOTS RESPONSES

TO FOOD POVERTY IN COVENTRY (UK)

**EXECUTIVE
SUMMARY
ONLY**

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COVENTRY FOOD JUSTICE NETWORK

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To cite this document: Anderson, C.R., Sarrouy Kay, C., Saxena, L. P., Kneafsey, M., Maughan, C., and Tornaghi, C. (2016). *Grassroots Responses To Food Poverty In Coventry (UK)*. Report. Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience. Coventry.

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Acknowledgements: We are grateful to all the participants in this research.

We are especially grateful to be working with some key people who have played an important role in the initial stages of the Coventry Food Justice Network including Mark Gibbins, Cassie Adjei, Kiri Norris, Christine Eade, Haley Egan and Georgina Egan. Thank you to Ben Cook for coordinating the video recording of the food justice walk and leading the video editing session and to Tom Wakeford for his support in developing the food justice network and his comments on this report. Thank you to Mariana Simon for her work as a research assistant, to Nicola Baird for her touch on editing this report and to Linda Newton from Clever Design for her work on the design.

This research was undertaken as a part of the Food Justice: Health, Resilience and Food in the City project funded by Coventry University.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THE UK HAS EXPERIENCED A GROWING NEED FOR EMERGENCY FOOD AID, A CRISIS OF DIET-RELATED HEALTH PROBLEMS AND AN INCREASE IN FOOD POVERTY.

According to recent estimates by Coventry City Council, approximately 20% of residents are living on the breadline and 26% of children are living in poverty. Such statistics are not uncommon in Britain's cities today, as government cutbacks reduce the capacity of the welfare state and local authorities to provide much needed services and infrastructure.

Within this context, this report provides a summary of research which explored how community organisations are responding to food poverty in Coventry. The analysis is based on interviews, desk-based research, and insights drawn from a series of events and workshops in the city which were organised by the Coventry Food Justice Network.

Coventry is a city with a proud industrial heritage and long history of community self-organisation through faith groups, trade unions and other voluntary initiatives to help people struggling with poverty and exclusion, support mutual-aid and to improve well-being in communities. Many innovative projects have arisen from different communities and there is much local capacity to respond to the growing challenge of food poverty in the city. Yet whilst many people are working hard to help those in need, our research shows that there is strong consensus that even if emergency food aid is a vital short-term solution to feeding hungry people, long-term solutions are needed to address the root causes of food poverty.

Based on our research, this report identifies five major aspects of food poverty that community organisations are tackling, and proposes seven key recommendations which could help the city to move towards a future where all of its residents have access to affordable, sustainable food for health and well-being.

Our findings suggest that community organisations are focusing on five main problems related to food poverty (See *Diagram, right*):

- **Hunger**
- **Food deskillling**
- **Poor access to healthy affordable food**
- **Isolation and community disconnection**
- **Poverty (as root cause of food poverty)**

We also draw out five primary types of activities and organisational efforts to respond to these problems:

- **Providing emergency food aid as a short-term intervention to address the immediate problem of hunger.**
- **Facilitating activities related to food reskilling, to build the capacity of individuals and groups in terms of buying, preparing and growing food.**
- **Improving access to affordable fresh food, and thus improving Coventry's food environment for all.**
- **Using food to draw people together in community spaces to strengthen social connections and to reduce social isolation.**
- **Confronting poverty as the root cause of food poverty by linking up with wider political campaigns and social movements.**

Participants in our research expressed a strong interest in connecting with other community initiatives working on food poverty and food sustainability issues in the city to create a better networked and coordinated approach. This is why we worked with community groups to develop the Coventry Food Justice Network (CFJN), which aims to provide a forum for community food initiatives to connect, get to know each other, establish partnerships and to create a space for mutual learning and collaboration. Moving beyond a focus on food poverty, the 'Food Justice' framework emphasises the intersection between food poverty and social justice issues within the broader context of growing inequality.



Our findings reflect a consensus that even if emergency food aid is an important short-term solution to feeding hungry people, long-term solutions need to address the root causes of food poverty. This will include a simultaneous effort to build capacity within communities for mutual aid, social innovation and confronting social exclusion, while at the same time tackling the political, cultural and economic systems that are creating the conditions for widespread poverty and marginalisation. Thus we propose a set of recommendations to move towards food justice in the short- and long-term in Coventry:

- **Coventry should develop a food strategy** for the city to support a multi-actor coordinated approach to addressing food poverty, food justice and food system sustainability. This should be linked to wider strategies to reduce poverty and address inequality at a city and a national level.

- **Food poverty and food justice initiatives**, such as Feeding Coventry, the Coventry Food Justice Network or any city-wide food plan, **should involve the participation of Coventry residents** to ensure these initiatives reflect the needs and visions of Coventry's diverse communities. This will require care to ensure the participation of women, refugees, youth, the elderly, the disabled and the wide range of ethnic communities represented in the city.

- Initiatives aimed at addressing food poverty should include a **focus on the structural problems in the economic and political system that form the root causes of poverty**. A food justice approach can be helpful to orientate food poverty and community workers to these root causes and for more people/organisations to pursue policy changes, cultural change and political work to build long-term material security for impoverished people in Britain. This might include focusing on how food poverty arises from low wages, government cutbacks, sanctions against welfare recipients and the normalisation of hunger in Britain.



- **Coventry City Council should develop a long-term strategy to develop urban agriculture in the city**, carefully planning to increase the relevance to those on low incomes or who otherwise may have difficulty physically and financially accessing these resources (e.g. the elderly, people with disabilities).

- **Stronger links** should be developed between strategies for emergency food aid provisioning and the longer-term projects to improve the food environment and/or to pursue food justice (such as urban agroecology, food co-operatives, healthy and sustainable procurement city-wide food policy, etc.).

- Support the **strengthening of community networks** to increase the capacity of citizens to develop joint projects and to engage in dialogue amongst diverse citizens on issues related to food justice. The Coventry Food Justice Network is one initiative that can be expanded to facilitate this dialogue and networking.

- Conduct **more research** to understand the underlying causes of food poverty, the uneven distribution of food poverty, the efficacy of different solutions being proposed and the opportunities to develop more just and sustainable food systems.

