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Building Post-COVID Community resilience by moving beyond emergency food support

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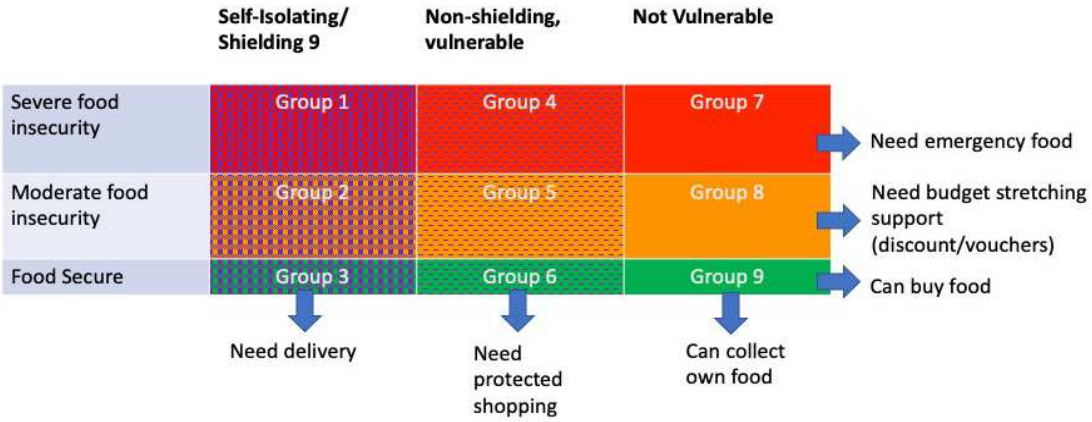
The need for resilience thinking concerning food access became particularly stark during the COVID-19 pandemic. In March of 2020 rates of COVID infection in England rose to such an extent that the government took the step to put its population into lockdown. People were instructed to work from home and not to socialise with others. Business and community organisations were closed unless they were providing front line or essential services. While food retail remained open throughout the lockdown, food insecurity was both amplified and an effect of the lockdown (Loopstra 2020). While national government and local authorities scrambled to mitigate these effects, it quickly became apparent that if we are to build back better during and after the COVID crisis, a new understanding of food provision and support for those most vulnerable to food insecurity is needed. It also became clear that some localities were more resilient to food insecurity compared to others.

In this chapter, I outline food insecurity and how it manifested itself during the initial lockdown period. I then turn to how local authorities and food providers responded to the crisis and their increasing realisation that a longer-term solution is needed. I propose the Food Ladders framework that mobilises resilience thinking as a way to evaluate food projects at the local scale *as well as the food landscapes (foodscapes) they are part of and then build them better*. The Food Ladders framework adopts a practice approach to understanding how food using activities enact resilience practice to achieve different outcomes concerning the availability and affordability of food as well as being a means to enable the social connectivity needed to provide mutual aid and support. While many localities are now adopting this framework to provide support within their communities, there remain structural barriers that pose a threat to the ability of these place-based interventions to succeed. The final section highlights some of these threats and suggests areas for further research and intervention to ease the way for local scale resilience to be enacted.

Food insecurity

Under normal conditions within the context of wealthy countries, hunger arises through a lack of financial resources to buy food. During the COVID lockdown, we saw food need increase for many through the inability to access food because they were unable to leave their homes (see figure 1). For some social networks could be relied upon to do the shopping, thus mitigating the vulnerability to food insecurity. Some estimates suggest the overlap between those who were financially food insecure and those who experienced food insecurity solely because they were required to shield for health reasons was approximately twenty-five per cent (Manchester council 2020), while others suggest the overlap is closer to 15% (Loopstra 2020). In practical terms, this means that the majority of people who received food support from government parcels could afford to buy food. In contrast, all who are financially insecure needed food support that was either reduced in cost or free, but for many, this was unavailable (see figure 1).

Figure 1: Food Insecurity Under COVID-19



Both hunger and obesity are indicators of food insecurity but so is social isolation (Blake 2019). Food insecurity is the inability to feed oneself and one's family consistently, sufficiently and nutritionally. At the same time, like Sam, who runs a community food hub, so succinctly states in the film *More than Just Food* (Blake 2018a), "If you have not got money for food, you have not got money to socialise." In the UK, we spend annually nearly £18bn on the NHS addressing diet-related ill health and the effects of loneliness (Scott et al 2018).

Those experiencing severe food insecurity, frequently forgo meals because of a lack of food. Emergency food providers generally target this group with their support. Those with moderate food insecurity, on the other hand, have narrow diets comprised of foods that are filling and inexpensive. A recent article published by Bloomberg news[1] illustrates this. The article highlights the plight of one Londoner, who gained two stone (28 lbs) during the lockdown because her costs increased and her local market was closed. Instead of eating fruit and vegetables, which she could previously access and afford, she and her children ate beans on toast or similar meals. This changing context forced her to substitute lower nutritional value food into her diet (Dowler et al 2001). When families exist within a state of moderate food insecurity over a long period, what they understand to be a 'normal' diet becomes dominated by these lower nutritional quality foods (Scott et al 2018). While many of these households have the skills to secure meals that are sufficient and filling within a tightly constrained budget, their skills identifying and cooking foods that are outside of this 'normal' diet become compromised.

At the community scale, there are recursive relationships between the food choices that people make and what is available within the local environment for them to purchase that lead to the creation of food deserts (McClintock 2011, Blake 2018b). These foodscapes contribute to the problems of obesity that are currently amplifying health inequalities. Under commercial conditions, food is on supermarket shelves to meet local demand in return for a profit. Items like fruits and vegetables have short shelf-lives and are more expensive to stock than ambient (e.g., tinned) or frozen food. If there is limited demand for these items, they

[1] De Sousa, Agnieszka. Weight gain is the flip side of Covid food crisis for wealthier nations. Bloomberg. 8 September 2020. https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2020-09-08/weight-gain-is-flip-side-of-covid-food-crisis-for-richer-nations

become waste. Over time the shelf space dedicated to such foods shrinks and ultimately disappears within areas where demand is low, such as those areas where people are food insecure. As such, even if people are exposed to and want to try foods that are important to a healthy diet, this is no longer available within their local context commercially. The obligation to travel to access these more nutritious foods increases the cost of what is already considered expensive and exotic.

Food is also social glue. It provides an opportunity to engage with reciprocal relationships that underpin the development of a supportive social network. Research demonstrates that those with strong social ties are more likely to live longer and better lives, even if their health is compromised (Dunbar 2017). Food insecurity threatens the ability for people to have strong social networks (Blake 2019). Work on food support demonstrates that providing food access in a way that reduces the stigma often associated with food banks also develops social networks (Blake 2019).

Local responses to COVID-19

With regard to local responses to COVID, a range of different actors evaluated what they were doing previously with many considering new ways of acting within the COVID lockdown foodscape. These actors span across to the food supply chain and include commercial, third sector and local authorities.

During the COVID crisis, there was an uneven response. Some Local Authorities merely signposted to existing emergency food parcel provision. In contrast, others such as Barnsley and Manchester became actively involved with existing providers and filled gaps where they arose. Barnsley, for example, worked in collaboration with *FareShare Yorkshire*, a surplus food distributor and Community Shop (a food community organisation) to coordinate a delivery service to those who needed low cost or free food support. Manchester council partnered with *FareShare Manchester*, local food bank providers, and *The Bread and Butter Thing* to create a system whereby the local authority acted as the point of contact and then facilitated food delivery to those in need. Manchester is now operating a triage system that starts with the USDA food insecurity questions to determine levels of income-related food insecurity (severe, moderate, no insecurity). The support staff then direct those who lack access but can purchase food to volunteers, refer those who need help stretching their budgets to pantry schemes, and prove free food to those who are severely insecure. These distinctions are helping them use local resources more effectively. They are also developing a network of food providers and providing ways for these providers to increase their ability to signpost or offer additional support and advice that extends beyond food parcels.

Alongside this local authority leadership, or in some cases its absence, many community-based organisations, including commercial, voluntary and social enterprises, also sought to fill gaps that arose. For example, those local producer supplier networks that primarily supply to the hospitality sector found themselves with an abundance of food with no market. At the same time supermarket shelves emptied as a result of shifts of people made in their eating habits (e.g., eating more at home, eating differently, stocking up on pantry items) set against the ways supermarkets stock their shelves. There are many examples of producers who previously supplied milk and produce through the catering supply chain developing box schemes in collaboration with taxi firms offering delivery. These deliveries were often available with 24 hours or less notice, compared to supermarket home delivery slots that were oversubscribed. One of many examples of this is City Grab in Sheffield that partnered with

milk, meat and produce suppliers to deliver restaurant meals and groceries to households. This service continues despite the easing of COVID restrictions.

Many community social-eating activities and pantry services had to have a radical rethink of how they provide support to their communities given lockdown conditions. Several developed meal and box schemes utilising restaurant kitchens, for example, the collaborations between organisations in Knowsley with local restaurants delivered more than 1000 meals to community members. Likewise, *Food Works* and *Food Hall* in Sheffield repurposed their café offers toward a meal delivery services. During the lockdown, *FoodWorks* provided meals to more than 600 families, while *Food Hall* delivered more than 12,000 meals. While delivery was the immediate solution for these organisations and others like them, many worry that the approach does not help achieve their community-building goals. To address this, *Food Hall* did a series of online shared meals and seminars to bring people together.

While these councils and organisations have filled an immediate gap, they are concerned that as the central government withdraws income support, there will be stark increases in demand for food support (Loopstra et al 2020). The initial lockdown saw hundreds of thousands of new applicants applying for welfare support, known as Universal Credit. The furlough scheme prevented even more from accessing Universal Credit. In October 2020, nearly twelve per cent of the workforce remained on full or partial furlough. However, as the furlough scheme ends and is replaced with the job support scheme expectations are that unemployment will increase dramatically, leading to further demand for food support. Concurrently, local authority budgets are at breaking point after years of austerity and charities are underfunded. Maintaining existing levels of emergency support is not tenable, let alone able to meet increasing demand.

After the long period of lockdown, surveys revealed dramatic increases in the number of people experiencing mental health issues (Li and Wang 2020). But as the numbers of local authorities within the country are going back into local lockdowns increases, there is wider recognition that we must find ways to keep people connected while remaining safe against the virus. We badly need solutions that build resilience at the local scale to redress incapacity in the food system, isolation, and shifts in the economic landscape alongside structural change to reduce or eliminate vulnerability to food insecurity.

Building resilience by creating Food Ladders

Recent work on community and household resilience has highlighted that resilience in a human context is best understood not as a characteristic, but as a set of practices that are established and repeated (Aranda and Hart 2014, Blake 2019). Furthermore, a practice approach understands that contexts help shape vulnerability to crisis (Hart et al. 2016, Blake 2019). To be resilient, communities need interventions that build capacity for people to live better within these contexts whilst also seeking to transform those contexts (Hart et al. 2016). Food Ladders is a novel, evidence-based approach for creating household and community resilience by capitalising on the capacity for food to bring people together. Food Ladders is not like existing household food insecurity approaches that focus on the lack of food within households and then feeds that gap. Instead, Food Ladders activates food and its related practices progressively to reduce local vulnerability to food insecurity and its knock-on effects.

To develop the framework, a critical and collaborative capacity building methodology was deployed over several years. It involved the researcher working closely with local authorities, food producers and surplus food providers, those who provide community-based food support, local food networks, and people who participate in these activities (Blake 2019). The methods involved workshops and experimentation that enable safe opportunities to learn from failure. It is curiosity-driven and engages learning by doing, reflecting, observing and listening to those who experience and engage with food insecurity on a day-to-day basis. Data include field diaries, interview transcripts, case study profiles, workshop artefacts, participant reflections, and survey responses. The analysis focused on household and community values and the mechanisms, tactics and strategies that reduce vulnerability in the medium and longer-term at the household and community scale.

While recent resilience literature has tended to consider three strata of resilience as coping, adapting, and transformation (e.g., Singh-Petersan and Underhill 2017). In keeping with resilience-as-practice, Food Ladders' levels capture food-based activity within communities as catching (doing to or for), capacity building (doing with), and transforming (doing by). Catching resilience focuses on the activities of the food support provider (e.g., providing charity) rather than the outcome as it relates to the individual (e.g. coping with crisis). Capacity-building activities aim to increase the ability of people to adapt and adjust to contexts that produce risk as well as increase their power to challenge and change those disenabling contexts. Transforming activity is that which is done by communities and includes self-organised activity that is community-focused, but which also positions community members as advocates and mobilises them to challenge unjust social structures (Botrell 2009, Aranda and Hart 2014, Hart et al. 2016).

The framework identifies activities and their effects specifically within three domains (food, social and economic) that the research highlighted as important to communities that struggle with food insecurity (see Blake 2019 for a discussion). The food domain focus specifically on its material presence and nutritional value and activities that enable these material items to become eaten (e.g., preparing meals and food items) and recognised as food (e.g., tasting sessions, foraging). The second domain includes those activities that build on the commensality of food to enhance social networks. The third domain considers how a particular activity can help overcome the economic limitations that give rise to everyday food insecurity among low-income households within advanced capitalist economies. Activity within each domain can be mapped across each of the three resilience levels (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Food Ladders Activity

	Catching	Capacity building	Transforming
Food	Emergency support: Food parcel, soup kitchen	Activities that expand food literacy, nutrition. E.g., cooking lessons, pantry schemes that expose people to new food items, children's food literacy.	Activities that diversify the foodscape to meet all local food needs. Positive relationships with food.
Social	Mental health support, befriending groups, resilience networks	Regular activities that bring people together to develop meaningful social networks. Breakfast clubs, afterschool clubs, craft sessions, social eating.	Self-organized activity, Social ties that look out for each other.
Economic	Free food to meet basic needs, crisis support. Signposting to services e.g., housing, welfare	Interventions that stretch budgets, financial, employability and business skills development. May help subsidize demand to help markets get established. Business incubators and start-up grants. Micro-enterprise	Local procurement and community growing, develop markets, creates demand, creates local profit and employment opportunity, activity that brings economic sustainability to an area.

The Food Ladders framework is a useful tool for those wishing to provide support within their communities because it helps them identify what is available and what is missing within their locality. By identifying gaps, relevant stakeholders can coordinate to fill these gaps with specific provision. This strategic creation of support not only prevents the proliferation of, for example, food banks providing emergency parcels, but it also means that the gap between emergency support and commercial food can be bridged through, for example, food pantries and social eating activities. Moreover, when ladders of support exist in place, people can be referred on to support up the ladder when they are ready.

Building back better after COVID-19

While the collaborations and invention that emerged during COVID-19 are inspiring, there remains much that needs to be worked out. Several third sector community organisations and social enterprises have developed capacity building activity across the three domains. Still, there remains a post-code lottery concerning their availability. We need more support in the form of finance, resources, and knowledge for the development of interventions that foster capacity building and transforming activity before we have resilient food landscape that reduces vulnerability to food insecurity. Unlike the emergency food parcel, social supermarkets and social eating activities require a greater degree of infrastructure to ensure that the food remains safe for human consumption. As such, these types of food support activities tend to cost more to provide. Should the central government provide funding for this? Alternatively, could government-funded personal budgets such as are made available within adult social care to access services needed by those with disabilities extend to those who struggle financially to support the provision of training, isolation, and food access offered by these organisations?

Transformation can only happen if there is this mobility along the ladder. To help people move from emergency or severe food insecurity to the intermediate level, those organisations providing emergency support should actively refer to existing schemes in their area or seek to develop such projects if they do not exist locally. However, a one size fits all approach is not the appropriate response given the ways these interventions provide social value that is more than just nutrients and calories. Moreover, building food ladders is not just about intervening at a particular point on the ladder but instead involves creating a system of interconnected ladders that utilise place-based assets. Some local authorities are seeking to facilitate the creation of local food ladders that provide food access that includes all levels of support, but

this remains difficult within the current budget constraints they face. If local authorities are to help even out services and act as a network coordinator, it is clear that increased funding and a mandate from central government is needed to ensure this happens.

The Food Ladders framework incorporates all actors within the foodscape, including those within the commercial sector. However, there is inherent differentiation in the food system, with each domain expressing different values and priorities (e.g., profit maximisation versus social value). Those in the commercial sector may not understand how they are contributing to a context of food insecurity in their localities scale (e.g., though low wages or distant sources). Furthermore, it is often difficult for the commercial sector to understand what benefits they might receive from seeing themselves as an active participant helping to shape the rungs on the ladders. More work is needed that helps make these connections explicit.

Activities that may be engaging with particular rungs on the ladder may be challenging to identify. While we are seeing some councils taking a central role as a network facilitator to help bridge this divide, not all do so. Furthermore, questions remain about the degree to which local government should take the lead in filling gaps where existing provision is limited as it is not always clear where this type of activity should sit. For some food, activity is linked closely to public health and wellbeing. Others see it as part of their community economic development effort. Still, others see food as a cross-cutting issue and are creating boards to oversee more system-oriented planning. Where food sits within local government structures helps to determine the interventions that are adopted. A clearer understanding of these differences is needed that includes evaluation of the benefits and limitations.

What is the role of the central government within this space? Recent history has seen government prioritise the needs of commercial markets and in particular profit-making with policy and action which benefits commercial activity occurring at the top of the ladder, lower rungs are less well supported. Social welfare systems and wage structures that are fit for purpose and which see their obligation as ensuring people are not plunged into destitution should be the starting point. Eliminating extreme poverty would significantly curtail the need for bottom rung food support.

Many questions also remain regarding the role policy and governmental departments should play in supporting and helping to fulfil the potential of those organisations operating within the capacity building part of the ladder. Historically there has been a tendency for government to prioritise a single provider because it is convenient, however many argue that hyper-local interventions can better meet local needs. Some have suggested that innovation or community funds should be more widely available to fill local gaps. One threat to the longevity of interventions concerns the project focus of funding provision, such that it does little to ensure the longer-term sustainability of both the provider and the project. Adopting social prescribing and personal budgets as a means to support community-based food activity provision may ensure benefits are accrued locally for both the service user and the service provider.

The experience of COVID in the United Kingdom has foregrounded and in some cases, exacerbated problems in the existing food system. It has brought into sharp focus the differences between what is normal for more affluent households and what is normal for those who struggle to afford and access food. It has highlighted the problems of an over-differentiated supply chain. But, as crisis often does, it has also shown us new ways of

collaborating that if capitalised upon can help us build back better in ways that create a fairer food system that produces and offers opportunities.

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