

## PROCEEDINGS OF THE NUTRITION SOCIETY

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### SYMPOSIUM ON

### 'SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC FACTORS IN HUMAN NUTRITION'

#### Poverty and welfare policies

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There are many definitions of poverty. The most common are based on either estimates of the minimum income level necessary for healthy survival or the relative position of income groups to each other. The first of these is concerned with subsistence, and the poor are those who have less than the resources needed by a man or a family to meet their minimum requirements. The second is concerned with inequality, and the poor are those in the bottom fraction (say tenth) of the income distribution or, paying more attention to the shape of the distribution, those with less than a proportion (say half) of the median income.

In its most restrictive sense, a subsistence level means that amount of income sufficient to meet an individual's or his family's nutritional needs. Nutritional needs, however, have yet to be strictly defined. But even if they were, substantial variations in nutritional requirements depend on an individual's social and occupational environment, so to allow for these individual variations there could not be a single standard unless it was a very generous one. And at what level would these nutritional standards be set: a level necessary to avoid chronic deficiency or one related to some notion of 'optimal' health?

There are further difficulties. How are nutritional needs to be translated into a diet? Food preferences and methods of preparation are culturally determined and meal times are social events. We cannot assume that food is divided equally between members of the family. Research studies have shown that in poor homes the father may be the only one to have a cooked meal, with the mother most likely to go without (Land, 1969). Therefore the foods an individual wants and chooses may not be the ones that he or she needs. Rowntree (1937) calculated the sum of money required to purchase types and quantities of food combining (supposedly) adequate nutritional

value with minimum cost. He arrived at a figure of 5s. 5d. per adult male per week. He recognised this might represent a rather unreal diet, for he wrote: 'no housewife without a considerable knowledge of the nutritive value of different foodstuffs and considerable skills in cooking would be likely to choose a menu at once so economically and so comparatively attractive as the one upon which I base my costs'. It is not surprising therefore that when Boyd-Orr (1936) studied actual food expenditure he found that until 10s. per adult was spent, the diet attained was deficient in some respects. This was a serious discrepancy. Using Rowntree's (1937) values, 30% of children were getting inadequate diets, while Boyd-Orr's (1936) values gave estimates of 50%. More recently it has been estimated that it is possible to survive on a diet costing less than 5 pence per d, but nobody in this country does so. It is also unrealistic to expect that a mother combining household duties with paid employment, living in accommodation which is both overcrowded and lacking amenities, and with insufficient money to take advantage of bulk buying, is going to be able to cater cheaply.

If we accept, and it is generally accepted, that nobody should have to live on a diet taking no account of custom and preference, then the cost of adequate nutrition, however we define adequacy, becomes a matter of subjective judgement. Moreover, the cost will have to be updated from time to time not only because prices change but also because customs and tastes change.

A minimum income must also allow for expenditure on warmth and shelter. While no one argues that these are not basic requirements, the cost of clothing, fuel and housing are also at the mercy of changing standards and customs, some of which are imposed on, rather than chosen by, the poor. For example, public health standards partially determine housing standards. Smokeless zones, in the interests of cleaner air, restrict choice of fuels, preventing the use of cheaper forms of heating. In addition, a changing society imposes new obligations as well as higher standards on the poor. An obvious but important example is the extension of dependency in childhood. Parents must support and send their children to school for nearly twice as long as they did a century ago. Therefore, in time any minimum income level will have to be revised upwards. The extent of revision necessary cannot be decided in an entirely objective or 'scientific' manner.

The calculation of a minimum income is further complicated by changes in what is to be considered 'necessary'. Rowntree's (1937) definitions of the poverty level changed over time to include a higher expenditure on conventional necessities. Whereas expenditure on food accounted for more than all the other items of expenditure put together in 1889, in 1936 food accounted for little less than half, and in his final survey in 1950, for little more than one-third. In contrast, the proportion allowed for household and personal 'sundries' increased. But as Townsend (1954) has asked, 'if clothing, money for travel to work and newspapers are considered to be "necessaries" in the conventional sense, why not tea, handkerchiefs, laundry, contraceptives, cosmetics, hair-dressing and shaving, and life insurance payments?'. The answer can only be determined by reference to social conventions. Once physical survival is assured there is no principle by which to determine minimum

levels. Definitions of poverty based on minimum requirements are therefore not absolute: they are both relative and subjective.

Poverty defined in terms of inequality has further dimensions. First, an individual's or household's resources are not only measured against some minimum level sufficient to meet basic needs (however defined), but also against the resources and living standards enjoyed by the average and the richer members of society. Therefore a measure of resources made solely in terms of current money income is inadequate. Living standards (future and current) are determined by the ownership of assets, particularly those whose realization can be distributed over time; by the availability, quality and use of public social services, especially education; and by the extent of occupational fringe benefits as well as by the level of an individual's money income. The availability of, and dependence upon, help from relatives, neighbours and friends may also be important.

Secondly, a family may be deprived in some respects and not others: there may be partial poverty. A family with a high money income may live in an area where schools and hospitals are of a low standard, for example. Rising average standards mask inequalities between areas, inequalities which may stem from a heritage of under-investment and inadequate provision made decades ago. It was in order to reduce inequalities of this nature that a policy of positive discrimination towards the really poor primary schools was adopted (Central Advisory Council for Education (England), 1967). In addition, in order to reduce these inequalities it may be necessary to restrict the rate of growth of the high-standard areas.

Thirdly, the concept requires a dynamic rather than a static analysis. We need to examine an individual's mobility upwards and downwards within the distribution. Therefore the period over which the measurement of income and resources is taken must be longer than a week (the usual period used for establishing minimum levels), and even annual incomes may be an inadequate measure. Lifetime income is as important a measure as annual income. We also need to know how inequalities are perpetuated from one generation to the next. We then have to study the total structure of society for, as Townsend (1967) has said: 'In advanced industrial societies inequalities are maintained by the educational system, by the institutions of property and inheritance, by the professions and the trade unions, and by popular ideas and beliefs about status, responsibility and rights. The process of structural change can introduce new inequalities as well as reduce existing ones'.

Once we start trying to answer these questions we cannot avoid seeing that being poor means, in addition to lack of money, an inability to control the circumstances of one's life in the face of more powerful groups in society.

Poverty defined in these terms is not easy to measure. However if we try to define and measure poverty only in terms of some minimum level of resources, i.e. a poverty line, the poor tend to be seen as a group separated from the rest of society. This obscures both the extent of and causes of poverty. Any estimate of the numbers of people in poverty at a given time conceals the fact that, during their lives, a much larger group of people pass in and out of poverty. One of the characteristics of life near the so-called poverty line is that household income is unstable. Many families

keep above the line only as long as mothers have paid employment or father has excessive hours of overtime. Twice as many people experience a fall in income below the poverty line during a year as are found below it at any point in time. A study just published estimates that 2 million children in Britain were living in families whose income was at or below Supplementary Benefit level (an income often taken as an 'official' minimum) during 1969 (Wedge & Prosser, 1973). It is certain that more than one in seven children will spend part of their childhood in poverty. The same study found that, among children in low-income families, more had suffered serious illness, more had hearing or speech impediments, more had accidents, more missed school because of ill-health and a higher proportion were physically less well-developed than children from more affluent homes. So, like their parents, they are likely to be more vulnerable to sickness and unemployment in adult life. And how many of them and their parents will be poor in old age? After low-wage earners and their families, the old are the next biggest group of the poor.

In addition, comparisons over time using a poverty line definition appear to reduce the size and hence the importance of poverty as a 'problem'. Although minimum income levels are likely to be revised upwards to take account of changing definitions of 'necessities' as well as of rising prices, they will not automatically be kept in line with rising real incomes. Today, a married man with three children receiving Supplementary Benefit will have an income equal to about 60% of the average earnings of a male manual worker. Of male manual workers, 10% earn this amount or less. Rowntree's (1937) minimum income in 1899 was nearly 80% of a male manual worker's average earnings. Thus as real income rises, the proportion of the population below such a poverty line appears to decrease, and so during the fifties we readily assumed that increasing affluence for the average worker had reduced poverty. We did not even bother to count the numbers of low-wage earners. Family allowances were allowed to decline in value. The direct food subsidies introduced during the last war were removed, the subsidy on welfare foods was finally withdrawn in 1960 (then cutting their uptake by half) and instead of making school meals free to all children as had been promised in 1947, charges to parents were increased. Recently, although we were aware that poverty even defined in its more restrictive sense was more extensive than previously supposed, especially among those in employment, free welfare and school milk have ceased to be universal benefits, the cost of school meals has increased still further and our cheap food policy has ended. Instead, we are attempting to tackle poverty with a battery of selective measures.

It is often argued that selective benefits are the only way to give substantial help to the poor. First, this argument assumes that deprivation is only felt by those with very low income, and that increased general prosperity brings a higher standard of living to all but those whose incomes lag behind. Are we confident that nutritional standards in this country are higher now than during the war, a period of austerity and rationing? There is evidence to suggest that nutritional standards declined in the fifties among families with average incomes as well as among those regarded as

poor (Lambert, 1964). Food was still relatively cheap then. Food costs more now, but so does housing, fuel and clothing. Can we be sure that the poor are the only ones nutritionally at risk? We ought at least to find out.

Secondly, it is assumed that selective benefits are an efficient way of alleviating poverty and its effects. If by efficient we mean cheap for the Government, that is true, but if we are concerned that those in need get assistance, then selective benefits based on a means test are not efficient. There is considerable evidence to show that benefits given to compensate for an inadequate income carry stigma and shame for their recipients. So much so that many entitled to these benefits do not apply for them. This is a deep-rooted feeling going back to the old Poor Law of the last century, when poverty was believed to be the result of individual failure. In the thirties, surveys showed that one-third of schoolchildren entitled to free school meals did not take them up. The proportion, in families with a full-time earner, was found to be even greater in a study made only 7 years ago (Ministry of Social Security, 1966). Even fewer take the free welfare foods to which they are entitled.

However, even if uptake was 100%, means-tested benefits still pose difficulties. There is the problem of what is commonly called 'the poverty trap'. This is the situation in which an individual, by earning another £1, loses as much or even more in the value of the means-tested benefits, say free school meals, free prescriptions, rent and rate rebates, for which he becomes ineligible. Unless he can earn several pounds more, his over-all position may not be much improved. That is both trapping the very poor and ignoring the needs of those with only slightly higher incomes.

For many years we have had social policies with nutritional objectives but these objectives have rarely been paramount. Free school meals, financed from the rates, were first introduced for those who were, in the words of the 1908 Act, 'unable by reason of lack of food to take full advantage of the Education provided for them'. The school milk service developed in the thirties not least because a depressed farming industry needed a steady market for milk. To get the school meals service established, as Titmuss (1958) later wrote, 'it needed a Second World War, employment demands for mothers in factories and another food shortage to achieve what 24 years of peace and thousands of nutrition investigations had failed to do'. Food subsidies and rationing in the Second World War were introduced with a view to curbing inflationary wage demands as well as for nutritional purposes. It is hardly surprising that nutrition policies have made rather erratic progress.

If we are really concerned to establish and maintain sound nutritional standards for everyone then we need nutrition policies which are not mere by-products of a set of piecemeal social or economic policies. Finally, it is my view that these policies will have to be universal rather than selective.

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