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Third sector advocacy: An exploration of the work of community food providers

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Abstract

This paper explores advocative work of third sector community food providers in Scotland. The paper argues these organisations can contribute to tackling household food insecurity through their advocative work, recognising that state-led policy on household income is needed. Capturing the advocacy of these organisations, rather than focussing solely on their service provision can provide insight which is largely missing from existing community food scholarship. The research adopts a quasi-ethnographic qualitative approach with 16 grassroots community food providers and 5 meso- level support organisations. The findings identify advocacy practices undertaken, targeted at political and public audiences and national and local institutional layers. It highlights tensions of this work, including fears of exacerbating a failing system. The findings also evidence a complementary, symbiotic, and reciprocally strengthening relationship between service provision and advocacy by third sector organisations. These contributions demonstrate the potential of this sector to contribute to social change required to address root causes of household food insecurity.

Introduction

This paper explores the advocacy work of third sector grassroots community organisations in Scotland, UK. The particular focus is on community food providers' work to support households experiencing food insecurity. These third sector organisations are community and voluntary organisations who provide a wide range of services to support households to access and enjoy food (Nourish and Poverty Truth Commission, 2018). This research builds on and situates itself within broader conceptual work stemming from the fields of just food systems (Blay-Palmer et al., 2016; Holt Gimenez and Shattuck, 2011; LaForge et al., 2017), community-led food initiatives (Escobar, 2001; Friedmann, 2007; Shove et al., 2012; Sonnino, 2016) and broader work on food sovereignty and food security (Patel, 2009; Wittman, 2011). Common to all are the challenges of real and sustained transformation of food systems at the grassroots level and wider food systems transformation. With a particular focus on food insecurity, it also acknowledges work on food poverty and constrained access to food (Bull and Harries, 2013; Galli et al., 2018; Lambie-Mumford, 2015) and in particular the critique that charitable food systems can perpetuate unjust food systems by focusing on food poverty in and of itself rather than the upstream systems that are the root causes of this (Bull and Harries, 2013; Riches, 2011).

The paper considers advocacy activities of these organisations and their agency to contribute to wider social change. This is an important contribution as existing evidence indicates that household food insecurity is a feature of broader poverty and requires State-led action targeted at increasing and stabilising household income (Brown and Tarasuk, 2019; Ionescu-Ittu et al., 2015; Li, 2021). The role of community food providers in this space is debated, as their service provision functions have been considered to do little to address the income driven root causes of this social issue. However, by foregrounding their advocacy and going beyond current conceptualisation of their service provision functions this paper suggests such organisations have agency for change, and the current political context provides an opportune time for this to be effective.

Household food insecurity, charitable food aid and the political context

Households experiencing food insecurity lack sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences (FAO, 2015). Fourteen percent of UK households experienced food insecurity in the year 2019/20 (Department for Work and Pensions, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated food insecurity (Food Foundation, 2021). Some households are more at risk of food insecurity: youth, non-white ethnicity, low education, those with disabilities and experiencing unemployment (Loopstra et al., 2019b). In the UK, austerity policies are a key driver of food insecurity (Jenkins et al., 2021). It is widely argued that State-led policy targeted at ensuring adequate income is the way to tackle this social issue. Research from Canada evidences the efficacy of such policy solutions (Brown and Tarasuk, 2019; Li, 2021).

In the absence of effective policy in the UK there has been significant growth in third sector organisations stepping in to support food insecure households (Gordon et al., 2018). Of note, are the increasing numbers of food banks operating in the UK. The two national organisations, the Trussell Trust and the Independent Food Aid Network (IFAN), report increasing numbers of outlets in their networks and an increasing number of parcels distributed. The Trussell Trust now has 1,300 food bank centres distributing 2.2 million emergency food parcels in 2021-2022, an 81% increase in 5 years (Trussell Trust, 2021). In addition, there are at least 1,172

independent food banks in the UK (Independent Food Aid Network, 2020; Loopstra et al., 2019a). The most common household type referred to Trussell Trust food banks are single people living alone. Single parents, renters, and people with a disability were also overrepresented (Bramley et al., 2021).

There are a wide range of charitable food organisations supporting low-income households. The function of these organisations is greater than emergency food aid, although this can be one of the services they provide. They can provide low-cost healthy food retail, community meals, community cooking groups and community growing. Due to lack of a clear nationwide network (Blake, 2019) quantitative data on scale of provision, demographics and socioeconomic characteristics of households accessing these types of food aid providers is sparse. The Scottish Government mapped organisations responding to food insecurity (including food banks): 744 organisations in Scotland were providing free and/or subsidised food and were doing so in a range of ways (Scottish Government, 2020).

There is considerable concern about such organisations as an adequate response to household food insecurity. Whilst their services may provide temporary relief or enhance individual skills, they do not address the underlying causes of household food insecurity (Caplan, 2016; Douglas et al., 2015b; Garthwaite et al., 2015; Huisken et al., 2017; Loopstra, 2018). There are longstanding concerns that the third sector allows the State to 'look the other way' and shift the responsibility for addressing food insecurity. The socio-economic structural factors driving food insecurity remain the same (Caplan, 2016; Dowler and O'Connor, 2012; Lambie-Mumford, 2018; Poppendieck, 1999; Silvasti and Riches, 2014; Tarasuk et al., 2020).

Dissatisfaction at the growth of charitable food aid has gradually infiltrated policy discourse. The Scottish Government in 2015 established the Independent Short Life Working Group on Food Poverty. Comprised of agencies from across Scottish society it published the report 'Dignity, ending hunger together in Scotland'. This provided recommendations around income maximisation and 'cash first', adopting a rights-based approach, and providing dignified responses to tackling food insecurity (Independent Working Group on Food Poverty, 2016). More recently, the Scottish Government have launched a national plan to end the need for food banks. Public consultation on the plan closed in January 2022.

These Scottish initiatives demonstrate political will for change and an opportune moment for community food providers to exercise their agency. There is a wide body of evidence on the powerful advocative role of the third sector (Almog-Bar and Schmid, 2013; Anheier, 2009; Fehsenfeld and Levinsen, 2019; Fyall, 2017; Shier and Handy, 2015; Wells and Anasti, 2019), there remains limited scholarship on the particular advocacy of community food providers. Early scholarship suggested that community food providers had very limited engagement in advocacy activities (Caraher and Dowler, 2007; Dowler and O'Connor, 2012). Cotemporary research finds that alongside service provision, community food providers also reflect on wider issues of food insecurity, have appetite for collective advocacy and can work towards longer term change (Denning, 2019; Macleod, 2015; Marshall and Cook, 2020).

Given the body of evidence on third sector advocacy, the current political context which seems open to change, and the growing capacity for community food providers, the current lack of evidence on the advocacy of community food providers represents a significant gap in knowledge. This paper responds to this gap by evidencing the advocative work in the sector. It explores the links between service provision and advocacy. Service provision itself cannot address the underlying drivers of food insecurity however strong service offering can enhance the advocative potential of community actors.

Method

This research is exploratory, examining a range of community food providers and the sector in which they operate. It utilises a 'quasi-ethnographic' approach including immersion in the sector over 18 months (Murtagh, 2007). All primary data collection was undertaken by the lead author, guided by the wider research team. At an organisational level, working with 16 community food providers, data was collected using ethnographic approaches. These approaches were semi-structured interviews with the manager, observations of activities, tours of premises, ad hoc conversations, and reviews of secondary data such as organisation websites, social media postings and annual reports. This was supported by interviews with five meso-level organisations.

Community food providers were first selected on the basis of a loose geographical area of the 'central belt' of Scotland, an area with the highest population density of the county. Given the aims of the wider study, a wide range of organisations were sought, including those providing emergency and non-emergency food aid, as well as a range of organisational forms. From here, the study employed judgement sampling, a form of purposive sampling in which the most productive sample is actively selected based on the researcher's practical knowledge of the research area, the available literature, and evidence from the study itself (Marshall, 1996). This led to the inclusion of 16 grassroots community food providers and five meso-level organisations. These meso-level organisations have close-knit contact with those working at a grassroots level and therefore play an integral role in the community food landscape.

Following an introductory email, where willingness to participate was indicated, the researcher asked to undertake an interview with the manager. These interviewees were purposefully chosen to capture perspectives from knowledgeable agents that would best represent each organisation's viewpoint. Full details of the 21 organisations who participated in the study are detailed in Table 1.

Table 1: Organisation type, activities and forms.

Grassroots community food providers			
	Activities	**Form**	**Description**
1	Emergency food aid provider	Independent Charity: Trussell Trust Foodbank	Food parcel distribution from 4 different collection sites.
2	Emergency food aid provider	Independent Charity: Trussell Trust Foodbank	Food parcel distribution from 2 different collection sites.
3	Emergency food aid provider	Independent Charity: Non-Trussell Trust Food bank	Weekly food parcel delivery to household.
4	Emergency food aid provider	Project of larger community organisation: Non-Trussell Trust Food bank	Food parcel distribution for collection.
5	Emergency food aid provider	Project of the church: Non-Trussell Trust Food bank	Food parcel distribution for collection.
6	Emergency food aid provider	Project of recruitment focussed social enterprise	Free food 'larder' every morning.

7	Emergency food aid provider	Project of advocacy focussed social enterprise	Food parcel distribution plus 'destitution cupboard' accessible at any time during working hours.
8	Emergency and non-emergency food provider	Project of arts focussed social enterprise.	Daily hot meal distribution from touring bus and food parcel distribution health and cooking classes, on site kitchen for hospitality training.
9	Emergency and non-emergency food provider	Project of the church	Weekly community meals and emergency food 'cupboard'.
10	Non-emergency food aid provider	Social Enterprise	Distribution of hot meals at different sites. Situated alongside after school clubs. For profit café.
11	Non-emergency food aid provider	Charity	Low-cost food retail (mostly fruit and veg) in shop community cooking groups.
12	Non-emergency food aid provider	Social enterprise	Low-cost food retail (fruit and veg, meal packs, other basics), community health and cooking classes, for profit retail, for profit training courses.
13	Non-emergency food aid provider	Social enterprise	Low-cost food retail (fruit and veg) community health and cooking classes, for profit contract with local council to supply fruit to local nurseries.
14	Non-emergency food aid provider	Social enterprise	Community health and cooking classes, community meals, for profit catering.
15	Non-emergency food aid provider	Social enterprise	Subsidised food provision in restaurant, community meals, for profit restaurant.
16	Non-emergency food aid provider	Social Enterprise	Community health and cooking classes, for profit cooking classes.
Meso-level organisations			
	Activities	**Form**	**Description**
1	Support for community food providers	Part of statutory health organisation	Networking and learning development opportunities, commissioning research and evaluation of community activity, distribution of funding to community food organisations (approx. £80,000 per annum).
2	Food social justice organisation	NGO	Campaigning for a Right to Food, supporting community food providers to reflect on and transition their practice towards a more dignified response to food insecurity.
3	Support for independent food banks	Volunteer run network	Supporting and connecting a range of independent frontline food aid organisations while, advocating on their behalf at a national level.
4	Support for the 'creative industry including community food providers	Social enterprise	Providing dedicated business support for the creative industries, offering support to a range of businesses including social enterprise.
5	Support for social enterprises including community food providers	Social enterprise	Informing, connecting, consulting, developing, and representing social enterprise organisations, host community food social enterprise network.

An iterative model of analysis was adopted (Gioia et al., 2012). Interview transcripts and research field notes were read in their entirety several times, and general impressions formed at this phase were noted, as memos, in the margins of printed copies of the transcripts (Creswell, 2007). These memos identified different forms of advocacy and were used as the

first coding framework to which all data was coded. Re-reading the transcripts and field notes for coding purposes also led to additional codes being established. Upon completion of this analysis of data collected from grassroots organisations, the transcripts of the interviews from the meso-level organisations were analysed, as were the field notes generated through the sectoral level engagement. Relevant data from these sources was used to populate the existing codes and the creation of new codes where necessary.

This was a fully recursive process of writing, discussing, and drafting involving all members of the research team. It facilitated the process of moving on from description to interpretation, requiring the researchers to continuously 'step back' and form larger meanings about what is going on (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Miles and Huberman, 1994). The final findings were, therefore, the outcome of a long and iterative process.

Findings and Discussion

Advocacy work of community food providers

Existing research highlights the powerful advocative role of the third sector (e.g. Wells and Anasti, 2019). Much of the advocacy literature investigates political change evidencing work to change policies, influence the decisions of government, facilitate civic participation, giving voice to citizens, and resisting detrimental social change. However, there is limited scholarship on the types of advocacy undertaken by community food providers and how this compares with the third sector advocacy more broadly. This study identified a range of advocacy being undertaken by the community food providers, summarised in Table 2.

Table 2: Advocacy of community food providers: audience, type and characteristics

Audience	**Type**	**Key characteristics**
Political Advocacy	Calling for policy change	Targeted calls for specific policy change such as removing the 'five-week wait' for the first universal credit payment. Calls for more general policy change to remove the need for charitable food aid. Often facilitated by meso-level organisations.
	'Influencing' relationships/ advising policymakers	Influence policy through building relationships with policymakers. Conversations that encourage people to think about the issue and challenge the status quo. Grassroots, on-the-ground experience legitimises these conversations.
	Collecting and providing data	Providing data and insight to Government and local councils. Data sharing through formal requests from local councils or more informal story telling.
Public advocacy	Education campaigns	Visits to local organisations (schools, local businesses) to discuss their work and its necessity. Ad hoc attempts to educate people about the experiences of those seeking food aid. Weaving education in with other organisational activities.
	Challenging othering	Influence public opinion in their day-to-day operations by challenging othering.
Both public and political audiences	Everyday advocacy	Their very existence was a political act by highlighting the issue of food poverty and drawing attention to structural failings.

Table 2 demonstrates that advocacy in community food organisations exists on a spectrum. This recognises that individual community food providers exhibit variation in the scale, intentionality, explicitness, and activeness for advocacy. Such variation adds to existing literature which debates the intentionality and purposefulness of institutional change work (Lawrence et al., 2009; Mahoney and Thelen, 2010).

Some advocacy is explicit and planned. The financial statements of one of the food banks include the aim, *"to be associated with campaigns and other actions to alleviate and end food poverty"*. They operationalised this through messages posted on their social media sites voicing dissatisfaction at having to exist and calling for policy change. Other forms of advocacy were more implicit and ingrained in day-to-day operations. Some organisations challenged 'othering', a process which draws a line between 'us' and 'them' (Lister, 2015 pg. 142), through their open and unqualified criteria for participation as described by the manager of the social restaurant:

> *"Everyone is treated exactly the same, whether they have a million pounds or nothing, they are treated exactly the same."* [Founder and Manager, Community food provider]

Offering everyone the same service was inherent to the founder's vision. The only difference between 'in need' customers and full-paying customers was the means by how they facilitated their exchange (i.e., paying what they could rather than the full price or offering their time as an exchange). This blending and mixing of the two client groups were fundamental to the vision to firstly, help combat the social isolation that accompanies food poverty and secondly challenge myths and judgements around the undeserving poor (Garthwaite et al., 2015). This approach can be seen as a form of subtle public advocacy (see Table 2) designed to overcome 'othering' with no secondary or 'distinctly different' option for those experiencing food insecurity (Hudson, 2002; 2010 Lambie-Mumford, 2015; Onyx et al., 2010).

Everyday advocacy (Walker et al., 2015) was particulalrly evident. Interviewees consider their organisational existence to be a political act that highlights the issue of food insecurity, raising it in public consciousness, and drawing attention to structural failings. Everyday advocacy is tacitly evident in organisations, as one food bank manager suggests the increasing visibility of food banks can itself be advocative of change:

> *"But I would say some things are starting to change due to the, I suppose, the normalisation of it all. Which a lot of people think is a bad thing. But I think it's a sign of it, at least, being accepted that this is happening. I mean normalisation doesn't have to be a bad thing; it really depends on how you look at it. I think that people are starting to open their eyes that it is happening round the corner from them. And that is what will help to start to change it."* [Manager, Community food provider]

Target for change and inherent tensions

Interviewees commonly located the change necessary to tackle food insecurity at the structural level. One interviewee described the necessary change as "*monolithic",* suggesting need for a "*massive shift needed in how we support folk*" [Development worker, community food provider]. Another argued for "*drastic changes in the political climate*" [Manager, community food provider] and another "*some radical political change"* [Manager, community food provider]. Beyond broad structural observations, interviewees also discussed more specific issues. Interviewees focused on the introduction of Universal Credit, benefits sanctioning, a need for "*better processes at the DWP [Department for work and pensions]"*

[Manager, community food provider] including changes to the way refugees and asylum seekers are supported. This echoes previous research where the main drivers of food bank use are benefit sanctions and low paid, insecure work (Garthwaite, 2016; Lambie-Mumford and Dowler, 2014; Loopstra et al., 2018; MacLeod et al., 2019). Accordingly, interviewees rejected individual failure driving food poverty (Garthwaite, 2017; Glaze and Richardson, 2017; Wells and Caraher, 2014).

By identifying the root problem of food insecurity at the structural level, interviewees often considered their advocacy to be targeted at the institutional environment. This is evidenced in Table 2. This form of advocacy was more commonly undertaken by the meso-level organisations. Meso-level organisations typically have a dual role in affecting policy. First to engage with relevant civil servants and politicians, build relationships and represent the sector advocating for policy change. Second, through relationship building they can support grassroots organisations to undertake their own structural advocacy work, encouraging and ensuring that these voices are represented in policy consultations and more informal policy networks.

> *"We try to share what's going on. So rather than saying, here's a policy, isn't it terrible, we say here's a policy and you really should read it, you really should give your views on it. But we're not going to tell you what your views should be."* [Manager, Meso-level organisation].

The relatively small scale of the Scottish context makes it possible for relationships between the few meso-level organisations and relevant civil servants to develop and for grassroots organisations to have an opportunity to join policy conversations.

They also supported grassroots advocacy through networking organisations. All meso-organisations maintained formal membership or supported informal networking. Networks can support advocacy in several ways: being connected may increase involvement in direct action, make their voice more persuasive may increase access to policymakers, and increases the legitimacy and status of each organisation (Beaton et al., 2021; Deephouse and Suchman, 2008; Fyall, 2016; Leroux and Goerdel, 2009). Whilst grassroots organisations seek change in the institutional environment, being able to act at this level often requires additional pathways provided by meso level organisations.

Many individual organisations were also engaged in institutional advocacy through 'influencing relationships/ advising policymakers. One interviewee talked of planned and strategic action to build a positive working relationship with local policymakers:

> *"The Sustainable Food Cities conference [was on]. He [a local councillor] and a policy officer from the council were going to it, so I went. And I used the time to get involved [with them]."* [Manager, Community food provider]

Advocacy can be targeted at different layers of the institutional environment, and our data shows that grassroots service providers may be well placed to target some layers.

Community food providers faced the difficult situation of potentially perpetuating the failing system which creates the need for them (Caplan, 2016; Poppendieck, 1999; Riches and Tarasuk, 2014). One interviewee specifically identified this as a *considerable* tension, discussing how organisations providing emergency food by 'filling a gap' may support a system that allows the State to avoid responsibilities:

"I don't know if our organisation has done the right thing and are we allowing the system to be maintained by offering a service to stop people [going hungry]." [Manager, Community food provider]

Further tension arose between advocacy by organisations dependant on institutional funding and access to that funding (Arvidson et al., 2018; Cairns et al., 2010). Our organisations were reliant on funding from external audiences such as public donations, charitable grants (e.g., national lottery funding), and statutory funding (both local and national). Securing funding requires organisations to prove need for their ongoing existence. This can sit uneasily with efforts to effect change in the underlying policies that have led to the need for their service (Elsana, 2021). These tensions are recognised by one of the food banks who advocate for the end of food banks while simultaneously struggling to negotiate the Scottish Government funding changes requiring dignified food responses.

"I mean when the Government brought in the Fair Food Transformation Fund, I looked at the application form for that and it said, 'emergency food provision excluded'. That was one of the lowest of low points." [Trustee, Community food provider]

The quote demonstrates that whilst they supported the principle of ending the need for food banks, the consequence of this was the closure of a potential funding stream, they relied on to continue their much-needed work in the short term.

Complimentary links between service provision and advocacy

Third sector advocacy literature recognises tensions between service provision and advocacy of the type we see in our data (Elsana, 2021; Hasenfeld and Gidron, 2005; Megan, 2010). For organisations that are primarily service providers tensions may arise due to concern that antagonising the state through advocacy may threaten potential funding options, being seen to be too 'radical' may threaten potential collaboration opportunities, advocacy may consume resources required for service provision, and advocacy may lead to mission drift (Almog-Bar and Schmid, 2013; Chetkovich and Kunreuther, 2006; Cookingham Bailey, 2020; Elsana, 2021; Moulton and Eckerd, 2011). Despite these tensions, service provision can enhance advocacy. Service provision may provide access to policymakers, provide a means to develop relationships and trust with the community being represented, and provides an opportunity to identify gaps (Cookingham Bailey, 2020; Elsana, 2021). Our data identified complementary links between service provision and advocacy for community food providers, with many instances of service provision enhancing advocacy. In some cases, providing services allowed them access to other organisations with more direct political power, enhancing their ability to influence policy change. In others, providing services gave access to the wider community, enabling messaging around the experiences and structural drivers of food insecurity. That these two functions can act in complement for community food providers brings new insights into current scholarship that, rightly, questions the role that services such as food parcels and community meals, play in addressing the underlying causes of food insecurity (Caplan, 2016; Douglas et al., 2015b; Garthwaite et al., 2015; Huisken et al., 2017; Loopstra, 2018).

As an exemplar, one community food provider had developed a close working relationship with the local council, initially as a contractor to supply fruit and vegetables to local nurseries. The relationship began as transactional when the organisations was successful in a competitive tender to provide services. It developed as successful provision of this service made them visible to civil servants and local councillors as key local stakeholders in the sector.

Providing a reliable and quality service afforded them status and expertise. They were then approached to input to policy discussions around tackling food insecurity and subsequently involved in the planning, design, and delivery of two high profile, council-led interventions on food insecurity. The 'food poverty referral pathway', 2016, sought to support households experiencing a crisis with discretionary cash grant and the second, and 'Club 365', 2018, sought to provide families eligible for free school meals with food and other activities during the school holidays. Part of the rationale of these initiatives was to support households before they need emergency food aid. The community food provider was able to influence the design of these interventions, gain a position on the steering group and provide insight into previous successful approaches that the council could transfer to subsequent settings. Their voice and power in these policy initiatives came directly from their expertise in delivering grassroots services and track record of proven successful work in the area.

Community food providers often used the information they gathered 'on the ground' to influence policy. At the time of data collection, Glasgow City Council launched a 'Food Inequality Enquiry', responding to the Scottish Government 'Good Food Nation' findings and those of the Independent Working Group on Food Poverty which had included membership from some of our participant organisations. Many of the organisations in our sample participated in this GCC enquiry often using qualitative stories from their projects to express the realities of food insecurity. The encouragement to participate often came from meso-organisations helping to legitimise their right to be heard. One interviewee reflected, "*we'll be submitting to make sure the asylum seeker/refugee situation is accounted for*" [Project co-ordinator, Community food provider] and another commented, "*That was good to know that they were interested to hear from us*" [Manager, Community food provider]. Projects considered that as lone voices they may have been overlooked in policy reviews but that because they were recognised as part of a network of organisations with legitimacy in the field their individual stories carried more weight and power in delivering change.

Another way of influencing was telling these qualitative 'stories' to a range of audiences. One interviewee said,

> *"I am in talks with local councillors, they come out to [the] project, and I tell them the stories of what is happening. And then they feed it back to Government."* [Manager, Community food project]

Having legitimacy at local levels provided these projects with a route to be heard on a wider scale. They were able to use stories from their service provisions to bring home the realities of food insecurity and enlist those with wider national power as advocates on their behalf.

Political advocacy is not the only form of potent advocacy in the sector. Community providers were able to engage in public advocacy through their service provision using the opportunity to talk about drivers and experiences of food insecurity. Education and challenging othering are recognised as important if more subtle form of advocacy (Hudson, 2002; Onyx et al., 2010). Food bank managers talked about visiting local schools and businesses, discussing why food banks are needed and raising awareness of food insecurity. Other organisations worked to weave their public advocacy with other organisational activities. One food bank manager talked with pride about organising 'alternative' fundraising events that target those who may be less aware of the existence and causes of food insecurity. Their 'club' nights in the city centre target a younger, more affluent demographic, achieving wider awareness. The

staff at the social restaurant use informal conversations with customers to encourage critical thought about food insecurity. The manager says,

> *"And when people ask, the staff are now so well versed on what food poverty is and how to talk about it. It is just a natural conversation and if that customer then leaves thinking a bit differently about what food poverty is and who's experiencing it then we have also done something about that as well."* [Founder and Manager, Community food provider]

These activities are targeted at awareness and attitudinal change within the wider public and more diverse and untapped audience. Fehsenfeld and Levinsen (2019) have recognised this kind of awareness raising activities as important and legitimate aspects of advocative work with potential to include a greater range of voices to influence political discourse, challenging current inequality norms and ultimately create a groundswell movement for change.

Service provision bestows the organisations with legitimacy (Deephouse et al., 2017). Maintaining legitimacy in the eyes of the local community as well as maintaining legitimacy with government and other stakeholders is key to third sector organisations ability to act (Elsana, 2021). Service provision enhances internal organisational legitimacy as, , it brings organisations close to the grassroots, rooting them in the local community (Cookingham Bailey, 2020). This gives the community food providers 'downward accountability' which is often the criteria upon which third sector organisations base legitimacy judgements (Taylor and Warburton, 2003). Having downward accountability also gives the organisation external legitimacy, through their direct work they can provide insight on "how the details of social policy matter in the lives of vulnerable individuals and families" (Mosley, 2009a pg. 527). Community food providers use experiences of working with clients to identify clients' needs, gaps with statutory provision and potential solutions (Cookingham Bailey, 2020; DeSantis, 2010). Service provision is fundamental to organisational legitimacy, that in turn can strengthen their advocacy work. Work at the grassroots, in the local community allows them to participate in policy and programme discussions as a legitimate expert, with authentic expertise and knowledge (Onyx et al., 2010; Wells and Anasti, 2019).

Conclusion

The advocative role of the third sector is widely evidenced in existing literature (e.g. Wells and Anasti, 2019; Almog-Bar and Schmid, 2013). This paper is one of the first to specifically consider the advocacy activities of community food providers. This makes a valuable contribution to knowledge since these organisations, while at the forefront of supporting households experiencing food insecurity, are also critiqued to be perpetuating a failing system (Lambie-Mumford, 2018). Advocacy is a key mechanism for community food organisations to contribute to policy change (Brown and Tarasuk, 2019; Ionescu-Ittu et al., 2015; Li, 2021).

Dissatisfaction with food insecurity in the UK, is forecast to worsen due to the subsequent 'cost of living crisis'. Growing need and the public consensus that community food organisations are filling a gap that should be addressed by state-led policy are of concern to the organisations themselves, as well as a growing body of scholars.

However, this paper brings new insights to the debate and finds an enhanced role for such organisations in driving change. By looking beyond their service provision, recognising their advocative potential and evidencing this in action, this paper suggests these organisations

have some agency for policy change. This is of particular relevance in Scotland where our study is situated where there seems to be political will to address household food insecurity through policy levers around household income and to remove the need for food banks. Scotland may be distinctive with its relatively small scale and the connectedness of the meso-level organisations to each other and civic society. This enables the meso-level organisations to build relationships that pave the way for their grassroots members to participate in policy creation at multiple levels. We have also shown how they use the experiences of these organisations to demonstrate their legitimacy and authoritative voice. For example, the 2022 consultation on a national plan provided a concrete opportunity for our organisations to input to national policy decisions. This paper has however evidenced other routes and ongoing activity that demonstrates our organisations' ongoing agency for change. The political context provides an opportune moment for the community food providers to maximise the impact of this agency in Scotland but this need not be contextually unique. The other devolved nations have similar scale and similar opportunities. In English Northern Cities with Mayoral systems there is a place-based opportunity to capitalise on smaller civic communities and build strong, legitimate, and expertise-led policy relationships.

Furthermore, the paper contributes to existing scholarship by evidencing a complementary, symbiotic, and reciprocally strengthening relationship between service provision and advocacy by third sector organisations (Fehsenfeld and Levinsen, 2019; Gates, 2014; Wells and Anasti, 2019). The advocacy, and change potential of these organisations arises as a consequence of their service provision and is strengthened by it. The service provision bestows them with legitimacy as their frontline experience provides them with the knowledge of household need. This cumulative knowledge allows them to challenge narratives of individual blame in food insecurity. It strengthens their legitimacy to call for policy-based solutions. Their service provision marks them as experts in the field and bestows cultural capital to participate at the political level. Furthermore, their service delivery can drive the effectiveness of their advocacy, ensuring their focus is timely and targeted at the most pressing issues in a rapidly changing environment (Cookingham Bailey, 2020). We concur with existing literature arguing that service provision functions of community food providers cannot address the underlying drivers of the food insecurity, we suggest that it has secondary consequences that enhances advocacy, which is of relevance given the current political context in which they operate.

Finally, from a practice perspective, we recognise tensions around service and advocacy. It is imperative that these findings are not used to further burden community food providers, many of whom report fatigue and burnout (Gordon et al., 2022). Rather, by identifying their existing advocacy it is hoped that these findings may support and empower community food providers by recognising their important and often overlooked role in driving social change. This empowerment should sit alongside work by academics and policymakers to maximise the potential of these third sector organisations to contribute to the social change that is required to address the root causes of household food insecurity.

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