Food banks can only plug the holes in social safety nets

Donation-dependent, food banks aren’t a ‘normal’ part of support for those in need, but they help identify flaws in social protection

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A pyramid of 468 cans of soup, representing a seven-fold increase in the number of British people using food banks since the government came to power in 2010, according to the Unite union. Photograph: Alastair Grant/AP

A surge in food bank usage does not necessarily mean that our societies are “broken”. But nor does it mean that our social safety nets are simply doing their job and that this is business as usual. So what does this surge in the UK and across the developed world tell us? Surprisingly little – until the figures are broken down.

Unlike in developing countries, food banks in Europe or North America do not represent a last line of defence against starvation. Instead, a food bank may represent a final frontier of social protection for those with little or no disposable income. For someone suffering long-term unemployment it may be a temporary substitute for income support that cannot, or can no longer, be accessed; for the working poor, the numbers of which have been shamefully swelling over the past 20 years in all OECD countries, it may represent a means of avoiding cutting back on other essentials such as clothing or medicines and keeping food on the family table.

Food banks should not be seen as a “normal” part of national safety nets. They are not like cash transfers or food vouchers, to which people in need have a right under developed social security systems. Food banks depend on donations, and they are often run by volunteers: they are charity-based, not rights-based, and they should not be seen as a substitute for the robust social safety nets to which each individual has a right.

But the provision of a bowl of soup or a ration of canned fish is not all that food banks can provide. They also represent the best and most up-to-date source of data on social marginalisation in our societies – and thus hold the key to understanding the nature of poverty in developed countries. Access to food is the perfect bellwether for broader socio-economic inequalities. Food insecurity hotspots generally correlate not only with poverty but also with a series of factors that marginalise people and narrow their options.

Those living in the geographical or demographic hotspots of marginalisation may cut down on food expenses first, because the costs of rents are incompressible. In these cases people eat badly – or eat less.
Rather than symbolising a system that is broken across the board, food bank usage tells us where specifically it is broken, and which groups of people are falling through the cracks. There is therefore an urgent need for academic and political attention to the clientele of food banks. If we know their stories, we will know where and why our systems are failing.

What the net figures already show is that current social safety nets are either not extensive enough or not generous enough – or both. In many OECD countries inequality has been growing for years, and has now become so extreme that even where social safety nets are extensive, they cannot catch people who have fallen this far, and whose means languish so far below the costs of a decent diet and a decent life.

While food banks can prevent these people hitting rock bottom, they can never be more than a stop-gap, and can only offer basic subsistence from day to day – and not a route out of poverty. They cannot therefore be used as a substitute for real measures to address underlying poverty and inequality, and the food insecurity they generate. Instead, social protection systems – including unemployment and child benefits – must be set at levels that take into account the real cost of living and ensure adequate food for all, without compromising on other essentials. And governments should not be allowed to escape their obligations because private charities make up for their failures.

Developed and developing countries alike have a responsibility to dedicate the “maximum available resources” to fighting poverty to fulfil the human rights they have promised their citizens by signing up to treaties.

For developed countries these resources are evidently more plentiful – and the failure to eradicate extreme poverty is that much less excusable. Social protection cannot be dismissed as a fad of a bygone age when the public purse was full; it is the often the missing link between people and their legal entitlements – not least the right to food.

The lesson of the current upsurge in soup kitchens and food pantries is not that we need more food banks or fewer food banks. It is everything else – the social safety net above and around it – that needs to change, and the direction of that change can be oriented by the lessons that food banks, and the stories of their clientele, teach us.