UN official alarmed by rise of food banks in UK

Britons’ reliance on handouts could represent human rights abuse

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An explosion in the number of people forced to rely on food handouts in the UK could represent a human rights abuse, a top United Nations official has warned.

The UK’s growing food poverty crisis, which has been marked by a tenfold increase in the use of food banks since the start of the recession, has now attracted the attention of Olivier de Schutter, the UN’s Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food.

Mr de Schutter, who last year condemned the Canadian government for failing to ensure food security for thousands of its own citizens, will remind the UK Government of its “duty to protect” the basic human right to an adequate diet at a talk in London tomorrow.

"The right to an adequate diet is required under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (IESCR),” Mr de Schutter told The Independent. “What I looked at in Canada and what I shall commence upon in the UK is the idea that governments have a responsibility in ensuring adequate diets."

The Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food is charged with ensuring governments abide by Article 11 of the IESCR, which enshrines that people should be able to afford an adequate amount of food without having to compromise other basic needs. The bulk of his work is carried out in developing countries where much more severe food crises are caused by rising global food prices and supply constraints, but he has recently raised concerns over a concurrent problem in the world’s richest countries, where “the failure of social policies” since the recession has created growing inequalities.

Although UN protocol bars him from commenting specifically on the UK government’s response to food poverty before a formal investigation is launched, he pointed to the rise of food banks in developed countries as evidence that governments had shirked their “responsibility not to leave the poorest behind”.

The Trussell Trust, which now operates more than 300 food banks in the UK, has seen demand for its service increase year on year since the 2008/09 financial crisis. In 2011/12, 128,697 emergency food parcels were handed out – up from just 26,000 in 2008/9.

Trussell Trust chairman Chris Mould, who will share a platform with Mr de Schutter at a conference hosted by the charity Just Fair in London, said that the Government’s welfare reforms, a new tranche of which will come into effect from April, will bring “substantial additional pressures” to people living on the breadline, and that, this year, up to a quarter of a million food parcels may be needed to stop people slipping into starvation.
"We are about to see the collected and combined impact of a series of policy decisions coming from the 2012 budget and the implementation of the Welfare Reform Act, which will particularly impact people who are already vulnerable and on low incomes," he said. "We see the reality of food poverty day in and day out in food banks across the country. We see it and we’re often shocked by the depth of difficulty people face.”

The annual increase in welfare payments will be only one per cent this April, well below the rate of inflation, following cuts announced in George Osborne’s autumn statement last year. At the same time, cuts to housing benefits will come into effect, including a tax on spare bedrooms in social housing. Pilots of flagship policies such as the benefit cap and the streamlining of several benefit payments into one single payment, the universal credit, will also be rolled out in April.

Mr de Schutter’s intervention comes after Downing Street seemed to play down the impact of cutting the welfare bill on the food poverty rate, with a source claiming that food banks were useful for people who “needed a bit of extra food” but that “benefits are not set at such a low level that people can’t afford to eat”.

However, Labour claims that the Government’s austerity programme is directly to blame for the rise in food bank use in the UK. To use a food bank, individuals must be referred by a social worker, doctor, school, Job Centre or other front-line professional.

Shadow Equalities Minister Kate Green said: “Freezing working tax credit, cutting help with childcare costs and, from April, a one per cent increase in benefits (well below inflation) and cuts to housing benefit will mean that families struggle even more to find the money for food.

“Food banks do a great job but it is shameful that people have to rely on them,” she added. “The stigma of having to ask for food is one that no-one in a rich country should face...I would be very interested to know what view international human rights bodies would take to this.”

Mr de Schutter said the government had responded positively to contact from him over the food situation in the UK and had extended an invitation for a full-scale investigation.

Last year Mr de Schutter completed an 11-day mission to Canada, his first to a developed country. He reported “very desperate conditions” in a country where 850,000 rely on food banks and condemned the Canadian government’s “self-righteous” failure to acknowledge the scale of the problem on its doorstep.

Just Fair co-ordinator Jonathan Butterworth said that the UK “could benefit greatly” from a similar mission but Mr de Schutter said that time and budget restraints mean he will be unlikely to carry out a formal investigation.

Mr Mould said that government action on food poverty in the UK was urgently needed.

“Behind the statistics are hungry mouths,” he said. “This problem is not confined to just a few pockets of inner city Britain – this is widespread. It's a consequence of low income and the high rise in the cost of providing for basic needs. Therefore it needs political attention, from all parties.”