Food Poverty: UN Special Rapporteur Finds Austerity, Food Banks And Working Poor In UK 'Extremely Worrying'

Food banks must not be allowed to become a permanent fixture in the UK and Europe, or used by governments to "clear their conscience" and neglect their duty to protect the country's poorest people, a top UN official has warned.

The emergency food banks are now accepted by governments as the norm, which they "absolutely should not be", the UN's Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food Olivier de Schutter told HuffPost UK.

Salisbury foodbank volunteer Jill Plant sorts a donation of food at the foodbank centre

It is the UK’s government’s duty to protect the poorest in society and part of their duty under human rights law, de Schutter said.

On Monday night, the UN representative spoke about starvation in developed nations, at a talk organised by the charity Just Fair, alongside food bank charity chair Chris Mould of the Trussell Trust.

UN Protocol means he cannot comment on specific UK government policies.

But it is the working poor in Britain that most concern him, the fact that 62% of children in poverty are living in families where at least one of the parents has a job is "very striking" he told HuffPost UK before his speech.

"That is very worrying. It is really unacceptable. It shows wages are too low, people have to work part-time and not by choice, or that minimum wage legislation is not adequate. But it is worrying to see that in a country like the UK."

The horse meat scandal here too has not escaped his attention. "It is one more reason for us to be discontent with the mainstream food system. People have seen what it looks like and they don't like it.

"So governments must do more to promote alternatives, small farmers, small food systems. And it is not necessarily cheaper to eat these processed foods."

Last year, De Schutter published a damning UN report into Canada, and the failure of one of the world’s richest nations to protect its poorest citizens.

Foodbank volunteer Beccy Lang and Graham Herbert sort out donations

The country relies heavily on foodbanks, an emergency food system which is growing in Britain, feeding 260,000 people last year.

De Schutter said food banks were "becoming a fundamental feature of our social protection system and they absolutely should not.

"I admire them, but this is not a substitute for social policy which provides people with the right welfare support.

"It is not OK for governments to clear their conscience by these food banks taking over when it should be their responsibility. It should not become a permanent feature. And yet food banks are increasing, very strikingly so in the last five years."

Mould, of the Trussell Trust, told the talk on Monday night he envisaged every town in Britain would soon have a food bank.

"But it should be the same as every town having an ambulance service. It's for emergencies. If you need a food bank all the time, you need to be signposted to something more permanent that can help."

http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2013/02/19/food-poverty-un-special-rapporteur-olivier-de-schutter-food_b_2586142.html
In the first week of February 2013 alone, Trussell Trust foodbanks gave emergency food to 5,150 people in crisis across the UK.

In the same week, Downing Street, during PMQs, stated that foodbanks are there for people who 'feel they need a bit of extra food' and that benefits were set at a level that means people should not go hungry.

FOOD BANKS IN BRITAIN

- Trussell Trust foodbanks have fed over 260,000 people since April 2012.
- Trussell Trust foodbanks fed 128,697 in the entire 2011-12 financial year.
- The Trussell Trust is opening 3 new foodbanks every week.
- At the beginning of December 2011 The Trussell Trust had launched 149 foodbanks nationwide, we now have 292 launched nationwide: almost doubling the number of foodbanks in the last year.
- Trussell Trust foodbanks will give emergency food to over 15,000 over two weeks of Christmas.
- During that period in 2011, the trust fed 8,500 people.

The inequality in countries like Canada and the UK is almost more shocking that starvation elsewhere, De Schutter said.

He told HuffPost UK: “Rich countries have more of a duty towards their poor. They can meet their duty to the poor, and therefore they should not excuse their job in meeting it, because of austerity.

“We are on our way to a having a permanent underclass, people living in poor neighbourhoods that have no opportunities to choose different ways to feed themselves, fewer role models to follow and poverty transferred through generations.”

Olivier de Schutter, the UN’s Special Rapporteur on Right to Food

De Schutter said the UN’s human rights representatives were concerned that governments were using austerity as an excuse not to tackle inequality and the problems faced by the poorest in society.

“It is a concern for human rights committee at the UN that governments now have an austerity programme that do not take into account the needs of the poor,” he told HuffPost UK.

“And when you have a highly unequal society you have a large group of people with an interest in things not changing. It makes robust social policies more difficult to adopt.”

De Schutter acknowledges that starvation is not what occurs in developed nations, like it does in the Sahara or south Asia, but “it means people too poor to choose diets that are healthy for them. They develop diseases, they have health problems.

"The impact on healthcare in the next 15/20 years will be gigantic.”

In the run up to the event Just Fair Patron and Shadow Equalities Minister, Kate Green MP, stated that, "the coalition government says 'we’re all in this together'.

“But children should not be ‘in this’ at all. Nor should desperate families hit by benefit cuts or unemployment, or those in working households who earn too little to make ends meet. That is why I believe it is time for us to debate the introduction of a legal duty on the UK government to ensure an adequate standard of living for all.”

Jonny Butterworth, director of Just Fair, said "It is unacceptable that the seventh richest country in the world cannot ensure a basic threshold of decency for all of its people.

He urged de Schutter to make a similar mission to the UK as he had to Canada, saying the UK "could benefit greatly from a full country visit."

De Schutter told HuffPost UK has been invited to do an official mission to look at food poverty in the UK, by the government, but has declined due to other commitments. But he praised the government for being "willing to look in the mirror."

A DWP spokeswoman told HuffPost UK: "We welcome the contribution of voluntary organisations for the work they do with local communities. That is why Jobcentre Plus - for the first time - is now referring people to their services.

"Universal Credit will be gradually rolled out over four years from October 2013 and will directly lift hundreds of thousands of people out of poverty as well as encourage many to move into work with the knowledge they are better off in work than on benefits."

"Despite paying out £171bn in tax credits over the last decade alone, the previous Government failed to meet their target to halve child poverty by 2010 and far too many children were left behind.

"This Government remains committed to eradicating child poverty, but we want to take a new approach by tackling the root causes including worklessness, educational failure and family breakdown."

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