



The 'undeserving poor': How food system transformation is middle class and why this needs to change – with Dominic Watters

This briefing is based on a webinar given by Dominic Watters on 13 December 2023, for the AFN Network+. It is written by Knowledge Exchange Fellow, Jez Fredenburgh. You can watch the [full webinar here](#).

About Dominic

[Dominic Watters](#), also known as [Single Dad SW](#), is a single dad living in poverty and food and fuel insecurity in London. He and his daughter live in the most deprived block of their council estate and survive off free school meals, Universal Credit and pay-as-you-go gas and electricity meters. Dominic's ability to tell it like it is and connect the dots on poverty, has made him a sought after voice on these issues. He is a campaigner, speaker, and author of [Social Distance in Social Work: COVID Capsule One](#). He is a Food Foundation Ambassador and has appeared on BBC Newsnight, Sky News, and the New Statesman to name a few, and uses every platform he can access to speak up for the marginalised. He sits on the editorial board of the British Journal of Social Work (Oxford University Press), and has designed a ground-breaking training that promotes a Food and Fuel Insecurity Best Practice model for those supporting the most disadvantaged in our society.



Dominic and his daughter on their council estate, left, and Dominic on his estate, right.



Summary of key points:

"How can a transformation of the food system, without voices of those with lived and living experience [of poverty], truly be a transformation? I would suggest it can't" – Dominic Watters.

On poverty and insecurity...

- The 'cost of living crisis' is not new: The UK's poor have been in a cost of living crisis for much longer, but were often ignored.
- People often refer to a 'lived experience' of poverty or food insecurity, but that suggests the experience is in the past, whereas often it's still ongoing. Hence we should use the term 'living experience' (Watters, D. p5 2021) instead.
- Food insecurity and food poverty are often not experienced in isolation – people tend to face multiple overlapping insecurities; such as fuel poverty, digital poverty, and housing insecurity. Snobbery around these issues prevents many people who experience them from talking about them.
- 'Food poverty' and 'food insecurity' are not the same things: Food insecurity is the living experience of food poverty, which in itself has an impact on a person's whole wellbeing and ability to engage in society. It can make someone unable to function, let alone flourish.
- 'Cheap' food often means nutritionally bad food, which creates health inequalities that we are storing up as a country for years to come - the cost of which will be borne by the NHS. So 'cheap' food is not cheap when you take the health implications and loss of participation in society into account.

On how 'the undeserving poor' are often excluded...

- Ad hoc inclusion of people with living experience of poverty and food insecurity in the media, policy spaces and discussion forums etc, can be a catalyst for change. BUT, conversations about poverty should not be kept comfortable: It shouldn't be that organisations can bring out their 'person with lived experience' and then send them on their way, while the decision makers continue without them.
- The knowledge and ideas of people at the bottom of the hierarchy are often not fully acknowledged/ credited to them.
- People living in poverty are not always given the freedom to be truly open and critical because of the power dynamics often at play in different spaces, including discussion and policy forums.



On tackling the domination of 'middle class' thinking on food...

- We need to understand that we are all interconnected – people living in poverty and food insecurity are in the same world as people who aren't, and so there needs to be more focus on trying to understand 'our shared world' and the inequalities and insecurities that persist in it.
- Mutual knowledge exchange is key for moving forwards – it can inform us. For example, between academics and policy makers and those actually living in poverty and insecurity.
- Researchers and institutions need to look at how they can build sustained and sustainable relationships with living experience, and how that knowledge exchange can be mutually beneficial and mutually valued.



Dominic on his council estate, London.

Thoughts in more depth:

Dominic's experience of poverty and food insecurity

The shop on the estate where I live only sells the lowest quality of food and there's nothing fresh. So ironically, it's a food desert in the garden of England. During the Covid lockdowns, our lack of access to nutrition was really highlighted – because of our environment.

But food insecurity doesn't exist in isolation. You can't top up your gas and electricity in the shop on the estate. So it's also a fuel desert and the interconnected-ness of not having enough gas or electricity to cook your food, I hope is obvious.



Prior to Marcus Rashford's campaigning, I would never speak about my gas and electric being on emergency, my cooker that's from the local homeless charity, even my furniture, the bins that don't get collected and the black mould all up and down the block. I wouldn't speak about these things to anyone outside of my council estate, and that's mainly due to the shame and the snobbery that exists in our society.

At the beginning of Covid, I was studying at university, while experiencing acute food insecurity. There were days when my daughter could eat but I just had leftovers, if anything. We were also facing homelessness and getting notices seeking possession of our council flat because of wrongfully incurred rent arrears. So again, you can see how food insecurity is often coupled with other insecurities and inequalities.

Poverty isn't just a 'lived experience' – it's a 'living experience'

It is vital the voices of people living this inequality are heard. However, there is a difference between 'lived' and 'living' experience. Often, people interviewing me might say how they lived on a council estate 40 years ago and so they know all about the hardships I'm facing or talking about. It's not that this isn't of value or shouldn't be acknowledged, but there are certain insights and knowledge that can only be provided through having a current, recent or present relationship with the failings of the system.

That's why I've developed the idea of 'living experience' rather than what so often gets called a 'lived experience', to highlight that these inequalities are not a thing of the past: The poor have been in a cost of living crisis long before the phrase was popularised, but it's only now that we're getting this level of institutional focus.

What's food poverty, food insecurity and food inequality?

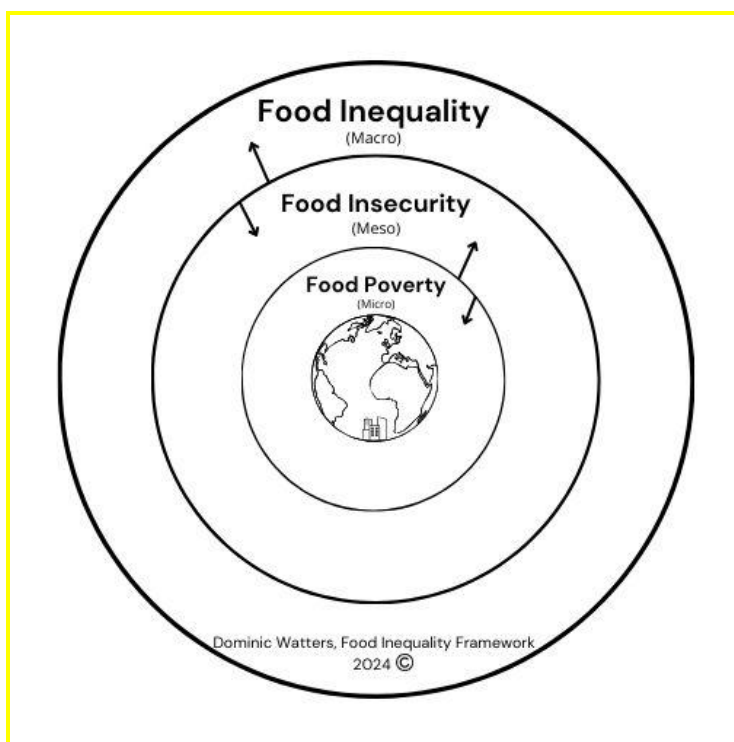
Food poverty is what Marcus Rashford spoke about, and is an *economical issue* resulting in a lack of food in your cupboard (if you're lucky enough to have a cupboard).

The [UN definition of food insecurity](#) is very competent and obviously covers a lot of elements. But I refine the idea of food insecurity to *the living experience of food poverty*. Food insecurity impacts your whole wellbeing, your ability to engage in society, and makes you unable to function; it preoccupies your mind and time, leads to anxiety, and the lack of nutrition impacts a person's physical and emotional health. It adds challenges to the already most disadvantaged in our society, and prevents people from flourishing.



So we can think of it as; food poverty at the micro level, food insecurity at the communal level (including its broader impacts), and food inequality at the macro level, where it includes the systemic unequal distribution of resources. This includes not just food, but other insecurities and inequalities such as homelessness, limited access to gas and electricity, inefficient and cold housing, and the disregard that you are met with when you raise these issues.

In considering the net zero agenda, we urgently need to ask how net zero can work to tackle these inequalities rather than deepening them.



Dominic Watters, SingleDadSW, Food Inequality Framework 2024

We need knowledge exchange between people living in poverty and those with power

There are a lot of people with the power to make decisions and share knowledge, who don't know much about poverty, or consider it not part of 'their world'. I know professors of wellbeing that didn't know what free school meals were prior to Covid. What does that say? I know people who are on the news and heads of NGOs, who are now talking about poverty but that three years ago didn't know what a pay-as-you-go, or prepaid gas and electric metre was.



We need knowledge exchange and space for learning between people in a position like mine, and academics, journalists, policy makers and other leaders in the field. This mutual knowledge exchange is a key part of moving forwards with sustainable change and making a discourse that is inclusive. To bring about true transformation of the food system, we need voices of lived and living experience – it should be integral to all the work being done.

We also need to be aware that the voices of those living in poverty are not always given the freedom to be truly open and truly critical because of power dynamics often at play. For example, I was asked to speak at a housing event about improving social housing – but the sponsor of the event was the company responsible for my own estate. So I couldn't talk freely as I wanted to get paid and be invited back.

'Our world' and 'your world' dynamics need tackling

I move between these different spaces – the poverty of my council estate and spaces of power – and see the 'our world' and 'your world' dynamics.

I get asked, by journalists for example, "how are things for people from your world?" It really speaks to this idea that we aren't together and your existence is very separate, and we will bring you out to provide these insights and then send you on your way. I hope we can move towards an 'our world' understanding, because what happens in Mayfair impacts on what happens in London Road Estate where I live – and it is valuable to understand that interconnectedness to bring about transformation.

We need uncomfortable conversations – not ad hoc inclusion

I get invited to different events and forums, and brush shoulders with politicians or decision makers, and I get brought out to speak about the daily realities of poverty and provide insights to individuals and organisations with power.

Bringing out a voice of lived experience can be a catalyst for change, but then to send that person on their way and let the 'big boys' and the 'big girls' look at the implications for policy, is far from truly inclusive.

We need these uncomfortable conversations at every level and for institutional planning and process, where research and institutions look at how they can build sustained and sustainable relationships with living experience. This knowledge exchange can be one that is mutually beneficial and mutually valued.



But I'm grateful and lucky enough to sometimes get to speak up for people like my neighbours that are often unheard. Some have given up on engaging in broader society.

When do co-creation projects work well and when do they not?

Co-creation projects are useful, and some of the projects I've seen have resulted in some good outcomes. But somebody like me is often only included to a certain level in these forums and your voice isn't meant to impact on bigger levels of policy. I'm sent back to my council estate, not knowing how I'm going to feed my daughter, or pay the rent.

Co-production has to be at institutional level, not just on a research project level. There have been lots of times where I've been asked, "what did you feed your daughter? What did you buy from the shop?" – but you're not in a zoo to give insight for the people with power or influence to then disseminate and discuss. It needs to be a two-way dialogue, where involvement is present at every stage.

Conducting research from a position of advantage really needs an understanding of how it is for vulnerable low income people: We have a sense of being let down by society, of being slighted, of hopelessness, and the obstacles that are placed in our way can destroy our aspirations and our horizons on a daily basis. I hear my neighbours talking about spending all day on the bus just to get the best deals on microwave meals, talking about washing their clothes less so they can save five pounds on their electric, or the clubs that their kids can't attend because of financial limitations.

Discussions about sustainable diets are often disconnected from people's reality

It seems to be a given that to achieve net zero and food system transformation, food is going to cost more and be more localised. But often single parent families in council estates don't enjoy that sort of safety net or margin to absorb this extra cost.

There's a farmers market a mile and a half away that stocks fresh food - but a lot of poor people and my neighbours, even if we could buy the food, wouldn't have enough gas to cook it from scratch. People are surviving on microwave meals because when you have pay-as-you-go gas and electric, you can see how much it's costing you.

So I think there is a bit of a disconnect that runs through a lot of these discussions, which is why it's so important that moving forwards the voices of people with living experience are included. It is scary that it is so broadly accepted that food will cost more, when we can't afford the food at current prices.



Free school meal vouchers are a good example: These are maybe £2-3 a day provided by local authorities, but what you could afford for that amount now is a lot less than at the beginning of COVID. This isn't being discussed and instead the NGOs in this space are campaigning for free school meals for all children, when the most disadvantaged can't have a healthy meal on the amount now. Because voices of living experience aren't often heard in these spaces, this is a less discussed hardship.

Silos prevent us from addressing fundamental structural and system issues

We seem to silo the real issue – the economics of deep inequality in this country into separate issues; food poverty, fuel poverty, child poverty, etc. By doing this, we risk compartmentalising buzz words and not addressing the fundamental structural issues.

This is why I try to always call it what it is – poverty and inequality. I've developed poverty and food insecurity awareness training for social workers, who work with the most disadvantaged families to better understand how to engage and approach these overlapping issues. This is an example of co-design working.

Calls for cheap food will cause more health inequalities

In the shop on my estate, the food isn't of nutritional value, and it's not even the cheapest – but accessing cheaper, nutritious food is a problem for many. This highlights the failures of the welfare system and the health inequalities that the poor often experience and that differentiate them between the affluent areas – with at least a 10 year difference in life expectancy.

These health inequalities are mounting and pending, and will hit more in years to come as a result of poverty and food insecurity. This cost will be passed on to the NHS, and so I hope we could have a shared desire as a society to tackle this.

People who have never experienced poverty can't fully understand – but they can listen

I don't think people who have never experienced poverty can truly understand what it's like. It's hard not to get emotional about it, if you suffer it.

There is however a level of understanding that can be achieved. Being poor and living with these insecurities is a bit like when you leave your keys or phone on a train, and then you get off and it's gone, and you've got that uncertainty and insecurity of not knowing how you're going to get back into your house. Poverty is like that constantly - it is your overriding focus, especially when you have sole responsibility for a child.



It's also important to highlight the emotional toll that talking about these issues has on someone living with poverty – to be open to people that you don't really know about these hardships. Snobbery has silenced me, even to loved ones. So a person's engagement on these topics should be properly acknowledged and credited.

Links and resources

Dominic's book, *Social Distance in Social Work: COVID Capsule One*

<https://www.amazon.co.uk/Social-Distance-Work-COVID-Capsule/dp/B096TQ6YCL>

Dominic on LinkedIn

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/dominic-singledadsw-watters-280bb4235/?originalSubdomain=uk>

Dominic on Twitter/ X <https://twitter.com/SingleDadSW>

Dominic on YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/@singledadsw>

Dominic's training on poverty awareness and food insecurity <https://cpag.org.uk/>

Joseph Rowntree on 'deep poverty and destitution' in the UK

<https://www.jrf.org.uk/deep-poverty-and-destitution>

The Centre for Social Justice report on the state of poverty in the UK and the warning that we are slipping back into 'Victorian era' levels of inequality

https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/CSJ-Two_Nations.pdf

The Food Foundation's Broken Plate 2023 report

<https://foodfoundation.org.uk/publication/broken-plate-2023>

The Resolution Foundation briefing on the UK government's commitment to half poverty by 2030 (yes, really) <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/publications/half-time/>



UNICEF ranking of child poverty - UK is amongst worst in Europe now

<https://www.unicef.org/globalinsight/reports/report-card-18-child-poverty-amidst-wealth>

And the Reuters story on the above

<https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/child-poverty-levels-uk-worst-among-worlds-richest-nations-unicef-report-finds-2023-12-06/>

More about this briefing

[Sign up to join AFN Network+](#), a community of 1400+ people across the UK agri-food system from academics to farmers, citizens, food companies, NGOs and policy makers. Together we are working towards identifying research gaps that could help unlock food system transformation towards a net zero UK by 2050.

This briefing is based on a webinar, which is part of a series run by AFN Network+ where we explore net zero in the UK agri-food system with leading movers and shakers. Expect deep and varied insight from across the sector, including farmers, scientists, policy analysts, community leaders, retailers, politicians, citizens, businesses and health professionals.

[Watch past webinars here](#)

This transcript was edited by [Jez Fredenburgh](#) (University of East Anglia). Jez is the Knowledge Exchange Fellow for the AFN Network+.

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