

‘You would eat it if you were hungry’. Local perceptions and interpretations of child food poverty

Ildikó Husz

Introduction

Food poverty and malnutrition among children, previously regarded as a problem of the developing world, now attracts concern in the most developed countries. The European welfare states, especially since the 2008 crisis, must acknowledge the inability of some families to provide satisfactory nutrition (Davis and Geiger, 2017). In many countries, for example, the proportion of households with children forced to give up regular meat consumption increased substantially (Unicef, 2014).

The definition of food poverty used in this paper is ‘the inability to consume an adequate quality or sufficient quantity of food in socially acceptable ways, or the uncertainty that one will be able to do so’ (Dowler and O’Connor, 2012:45). This situation is most often caused by insufficient material resources. Other factors that contribute to food poverty include the lack of knowledge and skills to eat healthy meals or an inadequate infrastructure in the residential environment.

Several studies have reported the negative consequences of child malnutrition: it increases the chances of child mortality, poor health, and chronic disease (Cook and others, 2004); impairs educational performance; reduces the length of schooling (Jyoti and others, 2005); and interferes with the development of social and other non-cognitive skills (Howard, 2011), which implies the necessity for effective policy interventions to provide proper nutrition for children whose families are unable to do so.

Recently, several government measures aimed to reduce child food poverty in Hungary. These measures have not always benefited those most in need. In this paper, through the example of social catering for children during school holidays, we explore some of the reasons behind that phenomenon. Because local authorities manage this service, we focus on local factors affecting provision.

We use a constructivist approach, by examining how, at local level, child food poverty becomes—or does not become—a social problem demanding intervention. The social construction of the problem involves a socially-determined perception and interpretation of facts. For policy-related problems, identifying who is in need is another part of the process. This identification process ‘refers to the cultural characterisations or popular images of the

persons or groups whose behaviour and well-being are affected by public policy' (Schneider and Ingram, 1993:334).

The principal questions addressed in the research are as follows: To what extent is the lack of provision for children in need caused by the local institutions' unsatisfactory perception of this problem? How does the perception that most of the affected children are Roma influence the likelihood of intervention?

The first part of the paper is a short literature review about the main factors that affect the the nutrition intake of children in low-income families. The second part outlines the Hungarian child food poverty situation and government measures aimed at reducing it. After describing the research methods, the third part presents the phenomena involved in the local construction of need and the ethnicised discourse concerning the deservingness of families in need.

Factors affecting child nutrition among low-income families

Many studies have shown significant differences in diet by socioeconomic status and have observed them among adults and their children (Darmon and Drewnowski, 2008). However, we still have insufficient knowledge, about the mechanisms that underlie these differences.

Structural factors, such as wage levels, social transfers, food prices, and costs to meet other needs (e.g. housing) limit the amount of money households can spend on food (Dowler and Dobson 1997; for literature review, see King and others, 2015). The less healthy eating pattern observed in low-income families is closely related to the lack of economic resources to afford an adequate diet. Under financial constraints, price is a critical factor when shopping, and cheaper foods are often nutritionally poor (Burns and others, 2013). Some evidence asserts that families with limited budgets attempt to provide a proper diet for children at the expense of the adults' food intake (McIntyre and others, 2003), but little is known about the specific variants of intrahousehold food allocation, and especially about the quantity-versus-quality question.

Research has illuminated the significance of cultural factors in what children eat. Nutritional knowledge, motivation, and parents' cooking skills influence the kinds of food offered to children. Empirical research has shown that children start out with an early preference for sweet, salty, and high energy foods and are relatively averse to bitter and sour tastes (Scaglioni and others, 2011). However, tastes can be formed before birth and while breastfeeding, through mother's diet (Mennella, 2014). The younger the child the greater the possibility of shaping their food preference predispositions, and this situation is largely

dependent on the home environment. The empirical data on whether families' low socioeconomic status is causally related to the knowledge, motivation, and skills necessary for a healthy diet are sparse and contradictory (Darmon and Drewnowski 2008).

Feeding styles and practices are significant in the establishment of a healthy diet for children. An authoritative (demanding and responsive) feeding style favours the formation of healthier eating habits, whereas an authoritarian style tends to have an adverse effect (Ventura and Birch, 2008), although the direction of the influence is not completely clear. The formation of a satisfactory diet is promoted by certain parenting practices such as introducing healthy foods into the diet through repeated exposure instead of parental control (restricting unhealthy foods or pressuring children to eat 'healthy' foods) (Ventura and Birch, 2008). Parental role modelling, nutritional awareness, and eating with children also positively influence the formation of satisfactory diet (Pocock and others, 2010). Most feeding strategy studies have been conducted among white middle-class families; thus, much less information exists about families with a low socioeconomic status (low-income or low educational level). The empirical evidence is not clear about whether feeding practices and parenting to promote healthy eating habits are less common in families with a low socioeconomic status. (McPhie and others, 2014)

The opportunities offered by the wider environment also constrain a child's diet. The physical and social dimensions of the local food environment (e.g. shops, supermarkets, restaurants, fast food outlets, nursery and school canteens, and snack bars) set the availability, accessibility, affordability, acceptability, and accommodation of healthy food (Caspi and others, 2012). In the case of low-income families, charitable and local- or community-based initiatives also play a role. Despite the increasing number of these programmes, they reach only fraction of potential recipients. Studies have revealed some of the reasons for that phenomena, including the potential users' lack of access to and information about the programme, the transaction costs of participation, and the shame and embarrassment associated with using food aid provision. (Kirkpatrick and Tarasuk, 2009, Yu and others, 2010, Loopstra and Tarasuk, 2013, for national programmes, see Gundersen, 2015). Studies have presented the recipients' perspectives of the barriers to these programmes. Here, through the example of a school-holiday meals provision, we examine the providers and what impairs their effectiveness in reacting to the problems of food-deprived children.

Child food poverty and government measures to reduce it in Hungary

Twenty-three per cent of Hungarian children live in income poverty; this rate is not much greater than that of the EU28 countries (21%). Considering other scales, such as parent' labour market position and material deprivation, we observe that poverty or social exclusion affects greater than one-third of children. The material deprivation indicators are particularly severe. For example, one-quarter of families with children have arrears with utility bills (EU28: 12%) and 77% cannot meet unexpected expenses (EU28: 41%) (Eurostat Website).

The main risk factors of child poverty in Hungary are parents' low educational level and poor labour market situation, and a high number of children in the household. The situation is particularly unsatisfactory for children living in villages and deprived areas with high unemployment and low levels of access to quality services. Among Romas, all the main poverty risk factors have a very high presence. (Gábos and Tóth, 2017)

Without regular direct measurements, assessing the number of children affected by food poverty is a difficult task. A survey of school-age children observed that 7.6%, 1.4%, and 0.9% went to bed hungry sometimes, frequently, and daily, respectively (Németh and Költő, 2011). Roma children are in an even worse position: a survey found 36% living in households which could not always afford the food required (FRA, 2014).

We have insufficient data on the qualitative aspects of low-income children's nutrition. The 2015 European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions observed that 25% of households with children and 53% of low-income households with children could not afford to eat meat every second day (EU28: 8% and 21% respectively) (Eurostat Website). Research conducted in a disadvantaged area found that flour, bread, pasta, potatoes, and lard dominate the diet of low-income families, and meat, dairy products, fruit, and vegetables are often absent (Bass, 2013). A national survey among Romas observed that this group ate much less more expensive foods, such as cheese, salami, and fruit juice, and a greater amount of cheaper foods, such as carbonated drinks, pasta, and white bread, than the average family. A low consumption of salad, fruit, vegetables, and brown bread and a preference for animal fats have also been observed (Koltai, 2013). These characteristics are almost certainly not of an ethnic nature but derived from the Romas' lower social position and can be generalised to other low-income families.

The 2008 economic crisis caused the rates of child poverty and child material deprivation to grow faster than the national average, especially among the groups with a high poverty risk. This situation can be partly explained by the deterioration of labour market conditions. Cuts in social and family expenditures are also involved. (Szikra, 2014) In addition, in-kind benefits

have been expanded at the expense of means-tested cash benefits. This change was allegedly required to ensure that families in need use the benefits ‘properly’. (Pindroch, 2012)

The changing significance of in-kind benefits is reflected in the increased subsidies for children’s meals. Since 2011, the children of low-income families (those whose monthly per capita income does not exceed approximately 125 euros—140% of the minimum pension) in creches, nurseries, and elementary schools have received morning and afternoon snacks and lunch free; students in secondary schools receive them at half price. Since 2015, the free meals provision has effectively been extended to every 0–5-year-old child attending creche or nursery. However, the most valuable cash transfer for children, the family allowance, has not increased since 2008.

Since 2002, the availability of the free lunch for children in need programme was extended to cover summer break, with the same eligibility criterion. Although the provision has been part of the Programme to Combat Child Poverty since 2009, until recently, the decision to provide this service was the responsibility of the local authorities, which could apply for state funding to pay for the costs.

In 2016, in connection with the amendment to the Child Protection Act, the government made local authority provision statutory and extended it to autumn, spring, and winter breaks while tightening the eligibility criteria. Currently, children of low-income families are eligible for a free summer lunch only if the household meets a further criterion of low socioeconomic status (having a low educated or unemployed parent, or inadequate housing).

These measures were put in place by the State Secretariat for Social Affairs. There is another package that has been initiated by the State Secretariat for Healthcare in reaction to the rising rate of child obesity. Since the beginning of the 2000s, the surveys of school and nursery canteens have unanimously observed that the quantity and quality of food do not meet the guidelines for healthy nutrition. (OÉTI 2008) In 2015, the government decided to impose central regulations on canteens. The regulations, known in the media as the ‘salt decree’, require major reductions in salt and sugar; the introduction of wholemeal bread and pasta; a considerable increase in the provision of dairy products, fresh fruit, and vegetables; and the achievement of a more varied diet.

The principles of healthy eating have been applied to the provision of meals for children on school holidays: instead of providing families in need with canned food and cooking ingredients. Since 2012, the eligible children have been receiving a freshly cooked lunch daily, which they can eat in place in a municipal institution or take home. Since this measure was introduced, the number of children receiving the meals has decreased from 136,000 to 105,000,

because many local authorities have been unable or unwilling to provide the service under the new conditions. In some villages, inadequate kitchen capacity or dining facilities is the problem, and in others, mayors had objections to the provision. Some disagreed with the manner in which the meals were provided, viewing the provision of ready meals as weakening the family's function in this respect (Husz and Marozsán, 2014). The dispute that developed concerning the new regulations also prompted arguments that touched on more general problems: the questions of need and 'deservingness'.

Research field and methods

We performed this research in the most disadvantaged small regions of Hungary, where the socioeconomic conditions and infrastructure are substantially more deprived than the national average. Most of these regions are remote areas far from Budapest, the capital, and located in the eastern, north-eastern, and southern rural parts of the country. Wide-ranging programmes to develop these worst-off rural regions (47 out of 175 small regions) have been launched including the regional projects of the Programme to Combat Child Poverty, which aim to improve the quality and accessibility of services for children based on local needs. The projects are accompanied by a mentor programme that helps to discover needs and formulates an appropriate range of services.

This study is based on three research projects connected with this mentoring activity conducted between 2013 and 2016. One was a questionnaire survey conducted in 2013 and 2014 on a representative sample of families with children in 23 of the most disadvantaged rural regions, examining the living circumstances of more than 6,100 households. The primary aim of the study was not to examine food deprivation, although the questionnaire included questions in that area. Instead, the surveys provided information about the nature of food poverty in the region studied (hereinafter Survey 2013/14).

The other two studies were qualitative and explored how local institutions address the problem of child food poverty. The source of data was a set of 87 semistructured interviews conducted with the decision-makers of local governments in 2013 to investigate the circumstances of summer catering for children (hereinafter Mayors, 2013).

In 2016, we extended the research on the reception of the new regulations regarding the holiday meals provision by conducting an additional 32 interviews with nursery and school teachers, kitchen managers, and social workers. The people in contact with the children and

their families are referred to as providers, and occasionally as ‘locals’, in this study because they all resided locally or in nearby villages and are in a position to shape the food discourse. We performed an additional nine interviews with the children’s mothers to increase our understanding of the local context mentioned by the providers (hereinafter Locals, 2016). This research has not yet been published.

First, we subjected the qualitative data to manifest thematic analysis to examine which themes appear in the data set of interviews. Then, four broad themes (needy people, hunger, responsibility towards the poor, deservingness of help) have been chosen to latent thematic analysis. Searching repeated patterns of meanings helped us to explore the respondents’ experiences and the meanings they attached to them.

Participation in the questionnaires and interviews was voluntary. All the information collected was anonymised. Respondents received no compensation for their participation.

Perceptions and evaluations of food poverty as a problem

In our study’s area, 52% of families with children were living in income poverty in 2013 (Survey 2013/14). In these regions, the income of most of the local population came from social transfers and public works employment, constituting a very modest living. For example, a family of two adults and three children receives an income equivalent to approximately 400 euros/month from these sources. Additional money can be earned from casual and seasonal work, but this is not always available and not available to everybody. A recommendation by the National Institute for Food and Nutrition Science states that a family of this composition must spend the equivalent of approximately 340 euros/month to eat healthily (Policy Agenda 2016), which implies that income constitutes a serious constraint on satisfactory nutrition in the areas under study. In addition, small villages exhibit a poor food environment: some do not have a grocery shop, and where there is one, the range of food choices is usually narrow and the prices are high. Animal husbandry and the cultivation of fruit and vegetables can, to some extent, reduce the dependence on shops, but not every low-income family can do this.

In our survey, regarding food deprivation, we asked the following question, ‘During the last 12 months, was there a time when there was not enough money to get food? (Yes or No)’: 36% of families said yes, and the figure for Roma families was 51%. These food deficits were usually related to the chronic periodic shortage of money: 66% of the families affected stated they had monthly financial problems (Survey 2013/14). It emerged from the parents’ interviews

that these food deficits were most common in the last week or two of the month, when the pay and social transfers received at the beginning of the month had run out. The number of days depended on the season, owing to such things as the need to buy firewood or to meet unexpected expenses. (Locals, 2016)

Most of the mayors were aware of food deprivation among the families: they reported that requests for emergency benefits proliferated towards the end of the month and a lack of food was often among the reasons stated in the applications. Requests for benefits often exceeded the local authority's means. As one mayor said, 'No amount of money would be enough.' (Interview 28, Mayors, 2013) Families' financial difficulties were also perceived in nurseries and schools, primarily in the 'weekend hunger' that became more common towards the end of the month. On Mondays, the children were more often restless, had difficulty concentrating, and "wolfed" their food. One teacher said:

You should see what happens on Mondays. The kitchen can't make enough morning and afternoon snacks, because (the children) keep coming back for more. So you can see that on Saturday and Sunday there wasn't enough for three meals a day... Very often it's terribly difficult to teach them in the first period because they are hungry. In the second period, it's much easier to work with them. (Interview 2, Locals, 2016)

The locals found contradictions in their observations of the eating habits of low-income families. Common complaints were that children were 'fussy' in school and nursery, did not eat their food, and threw away their afternoon snack on their way home. These beliefs were usually held to be typical of the children's behaviour and the explanations put forward exhibited some common themes including the consumption of sweets brought from home or peer group influences on food choices. As one teacher said:

'There's a saying that there's no such thing as bad food, just not being hungry. So, when children eventually get hungry, they eat what's put in front of them, that's for sure. If they fill themselves full of crisps, then they won't.' (Interview 2, Locals, 2016)

When speaking about low-income families, it has been argued that anybody displaying such behaviour could not be needy. In the same way, the sight of cola and crisps in shopping baskets at the beginning of the month gave the impression that the family was not short of money. One mayor summed up the contradictory observations:

'The council never hears about anybody going hungry. We hear that they don't have much to eat in the days before the benefit is paid, but on benefit day we see that families buy lots of things. Often, we see morning and afternoon snacks thrown away on the street. Poor children throw the food away and then we see (the parents) buying them cola and crisps' (Interview 48, Mayors 2013)

The question of need also arose regarding holiday meals. In the villages where this provision had been organised before, the mayors often mentioned bad experiences. The take-up fluctuated widely: the children did not always arrive for lunch or the parents did not always come for it. In certain cases mayors were rightly enraged, but a previous study reported the circumstances under which the unpredictability of take-up is more understandable. For example, some children came for lunch from a distant part of the village insufficiently served by public transport. On the days when a family already had lunch on the table, they did not send the child to the council canteen. A compounding factor was the requirement to escort the child, which was difficult for mothers who looked after younger children. In other cases, the older children did not arrive to claim their food because they were charged with babysitting while their parents were seasonally employed, or the older children went to work with their parents. In addition, making the meals free removed the incentive to cancel lunch if the children could not or did not want to make the trip to receive it (Husz and Marozsán, 2014)

The salt decree exacerbated the perception of waste about public catering. Canteen workers complained of food being thrown away, and parents complained that children could not get used to the new flavours. A mother of four said:

'My children get free meals (at school), we're a big family and disadvantaged, but the children don't eat there every day, because there's no salt in the food. Also, in the holidays we have to take the food in a food box. The way I see it, animals wouldn't eat it, let alone us. It's completely tasteless. Before the reform my kids ate what they got, and they asked for seconds. They even ate the food they don't like when they're at home.' (Interview 30, Locals, 2016)

Overall, there were few villages where children affected by food deprivation were not in the field of view of local institutions. In some villages however, this did not cause child food poverty to be perceived as a social problem demanding action, partly because of the

contradictory experiences regarding need, and partly because of the local's ideas about whether low-income families deserved assistance.

The question of deservingness in the child food poverty discourse

In 2013, one-third of the poorest villages and towns in Hungary did not organise summer meals for children (Husz and Marozsán, 2014). In our research area, only 32% of the children in families that occasionally lacked money for food took up summer meals. Of the remainder, 21% were not able to because the council did not provide such a service, 19% were not eligible on the basis of their family's income, and 28% had other reasons. (Survey 2013/14) This means that, because of a council decision, one-fifth of the children at risk of food poverty could not apply for provision. This situation was probably not caused by the aforementioned objective difficulties, because similar services for elderly people had been operating for several years in most of the villages. It was clear from the mayors' interviews that the municipal leaders, in many cases, questioned whether the families concerned deserved such provision. Those mayors who had never organised summer meals were most likely to mention this reason or the lack of need, but the question of who deserves what was also a frequently-mentioned theme in the other interviews. (Mayors, 2013)

These narratives about those taking up summer meals individualised the reasons leading to food deprivation. One accusation was that people who needed free food were to blame because they did not tend their gardens. The locals saw this laziness as proof of their unwillingness to work. Other arguments were that what underlay food poverty was a failure to be responsible for their money or having too many children, both of which implied irresponsibility on the part of the families. As two of the mayors said:

'The only families in trouble are those who did not make the effort to look after the plants from the seeds they got from Y (a charity organisation), and so they didn't grow anything in their gardens. It's usually the same families that don't look after the family income properly. I don't think any children in the village go hungry, but there are some families where children are not provided for properly because of parental neglect.' (Interview 31, Mayors 2013)

'I definitely see it as the family's responsibility how their children live, and so parents should only have as many children as they are able to support. They have to weigh that up.'

Unfortunately I think there are serious problems with this, especially among the Gypsies.'
(Interview 27, Mayors, 2013)

The Romas were frequent targets for comments about the irresponsibility of families. These narratives were often explicitly ethnicised. Food poverty was explained by factors allegedly rooted in 'Roma culture', such as having large numbers of children and short-sighted attitudes such as 'living for the moment'. As a teacher argued:

Here, the Gypsy population makes up quite a high proportion of the population. They have a way of life they've had since ancient times. If they get some money then they think, if we can live it up for three days, then that's how we'll live for three days. What happens after that doesn't matter. (Interview 12, Locals, 2016)

The parts of the narratives concerning eligibility illuminated the interests underlying the discourse on 'deservingness'. A large proportion of the population in these deprived regions, including those locally responsible for provision, cannot claim holiday meals for their children and are not better off financially than those eligible for social provision. A kitchen manager and mother of two, who was interviewed, presented one view of this:

'I don't think it's right. As I work it out, the amount they subsidise families means that people who don't get any benefits have less left over in their monthly budget than the families who are subsidised. If you have three children, you get free meals and schoolbooks. After I've paid for all that, I don't have as much left over for food as somebody with three or more children.'
(Interview 30, Locals, 2016)

The experience of providing children's meals did not cause these criticisms; the question of 'undeservingness' was settled long ago (see Kovács and others, 2013, Feischmidt and others, 2013). The only issue that had to be decided for the specific case of summer school meals was whether 'undeserving parents' should still be granted provision by virtue of their children's rights. Many mayors decided to organise the service. However, a minority withheld assistance and argued that instead of distributing food, parents should be pressed to provide for their children (Mayors, 2013).

We do not have sufficient information on the other reasons for not taking up holiday meals. Nonetheless, many families enduring the risk of food poverty managed to provide meals for their children from their own resources. Additionally, embarrassment may hinder some families from taking up food aid. This sense of shame was known to mayors and social workers, many of whom cited it as the reason why some of the families considered in need did not request children's meals during school breaks. One of the mayors gave this explanation:

'Most parents keep their difficulties secret. In such a tight-knit village society, you know, this can still be a stigma that parents are reluctant to expose themselves to, no matter how much in need they are or how much they are entitled.' (Interview 60, Mayors, 2013)

Conclusions and discussion

This paper is a contribution to the discussion concerning whether the state or local communities need to take action to reduce food poverty. Until 2015, the Hungarian system of providing meals during school holidays could be described as a state-supported local programme, where councils provided the service to those in need. The case studies here have pointed out some problems with the system.

In examining the reasons for the lack of summer meal provision, we observed that whether child food poverty is perceived as a social problem and a common cause generating community intervention largely depends on the correct problem perception of the local actors and accuracy of the local appraisal of need. To avoid incorrect perceptions, robust quantitative measures that identify food deprivation are required, which are not currently available. Further research is also necessary to increase the understanding of the particularities of consumption among low-income families (e.g. the relationship between choosiness and hunger, the functions of foods beyond nutrition, see Burns and others, 2013). The results of this study indicate the need to provide decision-makers (i.e. at the governmental and local level) with information to resolve inaccurate interpretations and to prevent prejudice.

This study also highlighted that the success of local programmes depends on the local discourses on 'deservingness'. These attitudes are often adverse towards Roma children in Hungary—as they are towards children of negatively-viewed minorities in other countries—and result in unequal access to benefits. Although we generally consider children to be exempt from the discourse on who deserves what, our study shows that in practice, children may suffer from their parents being judged as 'undeserving'.

Research has also observed several other policy dilemmas. We found that food deprivation in Hungary tends to be periodic rather than continuous, but the system of meals for children in school holidays involves daily provision. This contradiction has caused varying degrees of food waste in most villages that reduced the sympathy for the service among the local community. Consequently, a poorly implemented food aid intervention programme can damage the public's perception of low-income people by reinforcing the false and negative attitudes towards them.

This experience in Hungary prompts the question of whether the quantitative and qualitative aspects of food poverty can be addressed, simultaneously, through the same intervention. As we have demonstrated, regarding the reception of the salt decree, the government's intention to improve the quality of public catering has resulted in a negative externality that food-deprived children eat less of the food provided to them than they did previously. This is not an argument for abandoning the objective of improving the quality of meals in the case of children from low-income families, but it is certainly crucial to consider this effect when selecting the appropriate intervention. Another question is whether a reduction of child food poverty can be achieved without considering families. If there is no progress towards healthy eating among parents, we cannot expect any major improvement among children, even with better-quality public catering.

Finally, the task of government in reducing child food poverty should mainly be to increase monetary support for low-income families and strengthen their income-generating capabilities. In-kind benefits should only complement this support. Governments will realise the need for the necessary policy changes, however, only if presented with empirical evidence, based on adequate research, that families do spend increments in income on improving the quantity and quality of their children's food.

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