



The political economy of malnutrition

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PAFRAS (Positive Action for Refugees and Asylum Seekers) is an independent organisation based in Leeds. By working directly with asylum seekers and refugees it has consistently adapted to best meet and respond to the needs of some of the most marginalised people in society. Consequently, recognising the growing severity of destitution policies, in 2005 PAFRAS opened a 'drop-in' providing food parcels, hot meals, clothes, and toiletries. Simultaneously experienced case workers offer one-to-one support and give free information and assistance; primarily to destitute asylum seekers. PAFRAS works to promote social justice through a combination of direct assistance, individual case work, and research based interventions and analysis.

Below an underclass, destitute asylum seekers exist not even on the periphery of society; denied access to the world around them and forced into a life of penury. To be a destitute asylum seeker is to live a life of indefinite limbo that is largely invisible, and often ignored. It is also a life of fear; fear of detention, exploitation, and deportation.

It is from the experiences of those who are forced into destitution that PAFRAS briefing papers are drawn. All of the individual cases referred to stem from interviews or conversations with people who use the PAFRAS drop-in, and are used with their consent. As such, insight is offered into a corner of society that exists beyond the reach of mainstream provision. Drawing from these perspectives, PAFRAS briefing papers provide concise analyses of key policies and concerns relating to those who are rendered destitute through the asylum process. In doing so, the human impacts of destitution policies are emphasised.

PAFRAS Briefing Paper 10 focuses on the levels of malnutrition and food poverty to which refused asylum seekers are exposed. When a claim for asylum is rejected the claimant has to leave their accommodation in less than a month. Consequently, unable to work, and denied a range of welfare services, they are left destitute.

One of the implications of such a policy decision is that in many cases, almost instantaneously, a 'refused' asylum seeker becomes vulnerable to acute malnutrition. For many, food is not readily available and, without little access to money, the inevitable result is akin to starvation. This briefing paper looks in detail at the effects of this policy framework, and the impacts that it has upon those

who are made to suffer in this way. In doing so, it utilises interviews with people seeking asylum who either are, or have been destitute.

In turn, the insights gathered from these interviews are analysed alongside a focus upon the provision of food at PAFRAS. The food that PAFRAS provides, in the form of hot meals and food parcels, acts as a lifeline for those most in need. Yet, as shall be discussed, this food is not able to provide an adequate diet. Rather, it works barely to sustain people who have been subjected to conditions of penury in line with asylum policy. As this briefing paper emphasises, the effects of this policy culminate in physical and psychological harm on a substantial and growing scale.

Enforcing malnutrition

The UK is one of the richest nations in the world. Yet according to a report published by the British Association for Parenteral and Enteral Nutrition (BAPEN), in February 2009, more than 3 million people either suffer from or are at risk of malnutrition.¹ The reasons for this reflect a mix of factors including, as the authors state, poverty and social isolation and this influential study recommends the need for a strategy to be established targeting malnutrition within the general population. There is no doubt of the importance of such an initiative. However, for those who are refused asylum there is a unique and specific barrier in that their malnutrition is a direct result of government policy. They are forced into destitution within a matter of weeks of their claim for asylum reaching a negative decision. It is estimated that over 500,000 people could be living in these conditions – barred from working, too afraid to return home, and denied any form of shelter here.²

Destitution is institutionalised by the asylum system and the malnourishment that people suffer is located within this policy movement. That is, inadequate food consumption occurs alongside, and in conjunction with, homelessness and acute vulnerability. According to some analyses, the states denial of a range of opportunities can be read as an attempt to force people to leave the

¹ Elia, M. and Russell, C. A. (2009) *Combating Malnutrition: Recommendations for Action*, BAPEN: Worcester.

² These figures are from an interim report published by the London School of Economics, and commissioned by the Mayor of London: Gordon, I. Scanlon, K. Travers, T. and Whitehead, C. (2009) *Economic impact on London and the UK of an earned regularisation of irregular migrants in the UK: Interim Report from LSE London*, London: The London School of Economics.

country by rendering conditions unliveable.³ That this approach has not 'worked' in this way though suggests that, for hundreds of thousands of people at least, destitution is preferable to the conditions from which they have fled. As such, many refused asylum seekers are left with a stark choice of a life of transience, criminalisation, and severe poverty in the UK; or the fear of torture and potentially murder in the country from which they have fled. As a report published by PAFRAS in March 2009 emphasises, destitute asylum seekers in the UK suffer from multiple forms of physical and psychological degradation; of which malnutrition is one.⁴

Malnutrition is caused when an individual does not get the right amount of nutrients in their diet and, as such, is related to both the quality and quantity of food. Subjecting the effects of this to examination; the 'Minnesota Starvation Experiment', published in 1950, exposed a number of (consenting) volunteers to differing levels of starvation over a 12 month period. The effects were far-ranging and as well as concerted physical deterioration included severe emotional trauma, dejection, and confusion. One of the volunteers amputated some of his own fingers.⁵ According to the World Food Programme malnutrition, and causes that are related, contribute to a death every six seconds of a child across the planet.⁶

Malnutrition and destitution

Without ready access to food, and no 'legal' way through which to earn money, many destitute asylum seekers in the UK are pushed to the brink of starvation. Food is often of poor quality, it is also infrequent. With little control over their diets people are forced to take what is available, rather than what is desired or nutritional. The ability to be able to plan meals is reduced, and with no access to cooking facilities many people have to survive on food that does not need to be cooked or prepared. As one individual interviewed for this paper explained:

I have eaten out of bins, off floors, off grass in the park. What happens, after a while, is that you travel around, all the time, looking for ways to find something to eat.⁷

Similarly, another individual discussed how:

I eat rubbish. I have no control whatsoever over what I eat; it is whatever I can get at the time. Chips, sweets, burgers; anything. Anything at all because whatever it is it could be your last for some time.⁸

Compounding this further, the repercussions of malnutrition and poor diet are amalgamated with the wider symptoms of destitution. That is, people are pushed into a situation where they may be sleeping rough, eating poorly, at risk of attack,⁹ and suffering from the psychological repercussions of having to flee their homelands and live far from friends and family. As one person explained:

For 4 months I haven't touched hot water. Do I have money to travel on a bus? No. Can I buy clothes? No. Every day I have problems. Every day.¹⁰

Read in this way, the malnutrition that destitute asylum seekers may well experience can contribute to severe physical and mental health problems. As a dietician who works with PAFRAS has previously discussed:

Inadequate food intake causes low energy levels, weakness and sleep disturbance, and a depressed immune system leading to increased illness as well as long term physical damage and mental impairment – including decreased concentration, depression, anxiety, personality changes and social withdrawal.¹¹

Until 2008, refused asylum seekers could not access all forms of healthcare – and could potentially suffer life threatening illnesses without the necessary treatment. The government was eventually forced to back down though after a test case in which lawyers described the consequences of this policy as an example of 'grotesque human

³ For a discussion on destitution more generally see Burnett, J. (2009) 'What is destitution?', *PAFRAS Briefing Paper No. 9*, Leeds: PAFRAS.

⁴ Taylor, D. (2009) *Underground Lives: An investigation into the living conditions and survival strategies of destitute asylum seekers in the UK*, Leeds: PAFRAS.

⁵ Keys, A. Brozek, J. Henschel, A. Mickelsen, O. and Taylor, H. L. (1950) *The Biology of Human Starvation*, Vol. 1 and 2, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.

⁶ World Food Programme (2008) *Undernutrition: Women and Children Paying the Price*, Rome: World Food Programme.

⁷ Interview with author, February 2009.

⁸ Interview with author, March 2009.

⁹ Burnett, J. (2008) 'Racism, destitution and asylum', *PAFRAS Briefing Paper no. 6*, Leeds: PAFRAS.

¹⁰ Interview with Author, March 2009.

¹¹ PAFRAS (2007) *PAFRAS Newsletter 2: May – June*, Leeds: PAFRAS, p. 2.

suffering'.¹² The Department of Health appealed against this decision, however, and in March 2009 the Court of Appeal ruled that hospitals have discretion but not a duty to treat refused asylum seekers.¹³ Moreover, even where people are given treatment their financial situation still works to ensure that medical services can remain out of reach. With no money, people are frequently unable to use public transport to make appointments. Whilst the transience that destitution enforces compounds this further. At PAFRAS we are aware of cases where Doctors have removed patients from their care as they have not made appointments on numerous occasions. Forced to live in conditions of absolute penury, the effects of this on those who experience destitution can, not surprisingly, be deadly. A survey of 61 destitute asylum seekers in Leeds in 2008 revealed that, over one month, 26% discussed ending their own lives.¹⁴ Throughout the UK there is evidence that people have taken this 'option' – unable to stand the agonies they have been forced to endure any longer, and unable to return to the country they have fled from.¹⁵

Food provision at PAFRAS

In response to such policies a number of charities, organisations, campaigning networks, and faith groups have worked to try and provide food for those who are pushed into starvation. PAFRAS provides food in conjunction with other direct assistance services, case work, and research and analysis based activities; and its provision is a vital service for those most in need. The fact that, as discussed elsewhere,¹⁶ the amount of food that PAFRAS is providing is increasing at rapid pace indicates the extent to which people are becoming pushed into extremes of poverty. Put simply, there are increasing numbers of people who have no way through which to access food. As Table 1 shows, food provision has consequently risen directly in conjunction with visits to the project.

¹² Ford, R. (2008) 'Ruling gives failed asylum seekers free health care', *Times Online*, 12 April, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/politics/article3732002.ece>

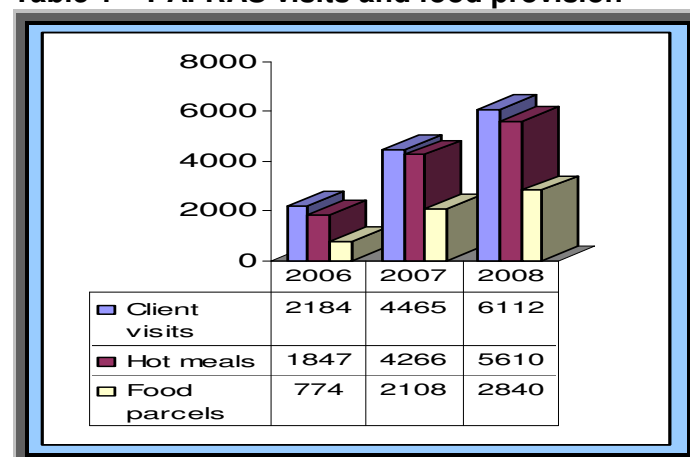
¹³ R (on the application of YA) and Secretary of State for Health (2009) EWCA Civ 225.

¹⁴ Burnett, J. (2008) 'Mental health, destitution and asylum', *PAFRAS Briefing Paper no. 5*, Leeds: PAFRAS.

¹⁵ See Athwal, H. (2006) *Driven to desperate measures*, London: Institute of Race Relations.

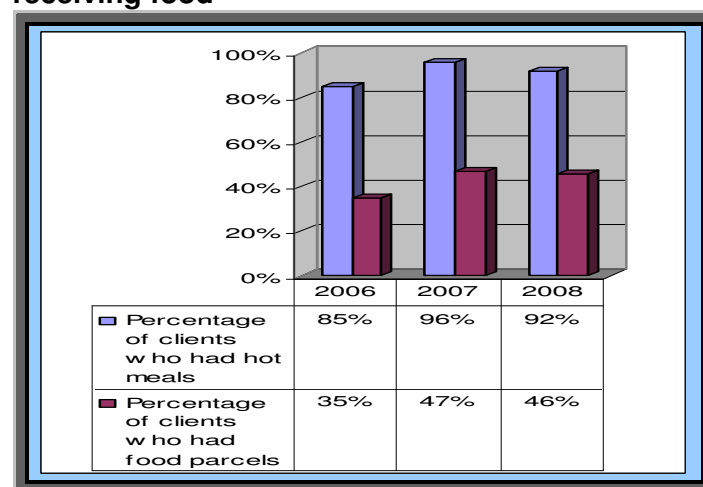
¹⁶ See Burnett, J. (2009) 'What is destitution?', *PAFRAS Briefing Paper No. 9*, Leeds: PAFRAS.

Table 1 – PAFRAS visits and food provision



Whilst Table 1 indicates the level of food of being provided though, it is important to recognise that 'visits' to PAFRAS do not necessarily refer to different people. There are people who have experienced destitution for years who are frequent visitors to the organisation, and as such, access the services on a regular basis. In this way, PAFRAS provides food for hundreds of people each year. This includes elderly people, and parents with young children as well as pregnant mothers.¹⁷ At the same time, whilst the *numbers* of meals and food parcels may have risen, the *proportion* of people who are receiving food provisions has remained relatively consistent – particularly in 2007 and 2008. Whilst the vast majority of those who come to PAFRAS are able to have a hot meal, the proportion of food parcels given out as compared to visits remains just under half (see Table 2).

Table 2 – Percentage of PAFRAS 'service users' receiving food



¹⁷ The effects of destitution on an unborn child are devastating and can lead to permanent harm, if not death. See Burnett, J. (2007) 'Condemning the unborn', *Institute of Race Relations News*, 13 December, <http://www.irr.org.uk/2007/december/ha000009.html>

What this means, in terms of those who PAFRAS provides a service for at least, is that whilst more people may be receiving food parcels; conversely, more people are going without. In 2007, of the 4465 visits to the project there were 2108 food parcels given out to people: meaning that 2357 visits went without a food parcel. In 2008 this number increased to 3272.

This takes on extra significance when considered alongside the fact that as people have been subjected to destitution for increasing lengths of time food parcels have taken on extra consequence, as a form of surrogate rent in exchange for accommodation. As has been noted elsewhere where accommodation is provided for destitute asylum seekers, it is most often by others in the asylum process. Not only does this put people at risk (as regulations frequently disallow people from staying over); it also rests on those who may have extremely limited resources to try and support friends and keep them off the streets.¹⁸ We are aware of cases where people have had to ask for food in this way, as they simply cannot afford to feed people they are supporting otherwise. Moreover those who are forced into absolute destitution – without food, shelter or support – may well have to find employment simply to stay alive, despite not having legal permission to do so. They exist as a highly exploitable workforce, often working in dangerous and insecure conditions.¹⁹

Conclusions

Existing as the end point of the asylum process for refused asylum seekers; there can be little doubt that destitution causes substantial harm upon those who live in such conditions. Destitution has created a form of human suffering on a grand scale. Speaking on behalf of New Labour, government officials frequently assert that there is no 'need' for refused asylum seekers to be destitute²⁰ – stating that support is available for those who agree to facilitate their own removal from the country. Yet,

¹⁸ For further discussion of this point see Taylor, D. (2009) *Underground Lives: An investigation into the living conditions and survival strategies of destitute asylum seekers in the UK*, Leeds: PAFRAS.

¹⁹ Burnett, J. (2008) 'Wage exploitation and undocumented labour', *PAFRAS Briefing Paper No. 7*, Leeds: PAFRAS; for wider discussion see Centre for Corporate Accountability (2009) *Migrants' Workplace Deaths in Britain*, London: Centre for Corporate Accountability.

²⁰ See for example McGuffin, P. (2009) 'Charities hit out over asylum', *Bradford Telegraph & Argus*, 19 March, [http://www.thetelegraphandargus.co.uk/search/4217721.Charities hit out over asylum/](http://www.thetelegraphandargus.co.uk/search/4217721.Charities%20hit%20out%20over%20asylum/)

for a variety of reasons, this is not the case. The hundreds of thousands of refused asylum seekers in the UK tell a different story by virtue of their presence. What cannot be denied is that destitution exists. And following on from this, regardless of government attempts to blame those who live in such conditions for their own suffering, is the simple fact that this same government has created a framework of destitution through a series of cognisant policy choices. In doing so, people who have sought to establish a safer life for themselves are being subjected to a strategy which enforces near starvation. The damage that malnutrition inflicts upon an individual can lead to permanent harm, and in extreme cases death.

Of over 6,000 visits to PAFRAS last year alone not all of these were from people who are living in absolute destitution, but many were. As discussed earlier, this has included pregnant women living transiently, sometimes sleeping outside, and with no access to food. We are aware of babies that have been born underweight, and undernourished as a result of the conditions in which their mothers have been made to live.

Food provision at PAFRAS consequently serves to provide basic sustenance for those who have been subjected to this policy strategy. Two hot meals and two food parcels a week though can never provide an adequate diet. Further, relying as it does upon donations, there are limits as to the length of time that people can continue to assist. As it is, there is not enough to cater for all of the people who need to take food parcels away. Ultimately, the New Labour government has generated a political economy of hunger. Malnutrition is used as part of a conscious strategy to make life as difficult as possible for those who are too afraid to leave the country. That is, its use is targeted specifically at one section of the population; as defined by their immigration status. We would do well to remember that under international law the political use of starvation is prohibited.

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