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Submission from:

Edmund Rice International
(NGO in Special Consultative Status with ECOSOC)
37-39 rue de Vermont, 1211 Geneva 20, Switzerland

in partnership with
Westcourt Centre, Belfast, Northern Ireland
Council for the Homelessness, Northern Ireland
Revive
Tree of Life
Wythenshawe

I INTRODUCTION & CONTEXT

1. This submission is by EDMUND RICE INTERNATIONAL, an NGO with ECOSOC status with the UN.
2. The submission has been developed by the European Province Advocacy Team, on behalf of the Edmund Rice Network in Northern Ireland and the Westcourt Centre, Belfast in association with the Council for the Homelessness in Northern Ireland,¹ and by the Edmund Rice Network UK on the basis of evidence gathered from service providers in the Greater Manchester Area. These organisations include Tree of Life, Real Food Wythenshaw, and the Wythenshaw Community Housing Group and REVIVE. This evidence has been correlated with evidence and data from The Trussell Trust and Oxfam
3. The Westcourt Centre in Belfast, Northern Ireland, promotes social inclusion and advocates on behalf of people who experience different forms of social exclusion.² Since 2008 The Westcourt Centre has been working with a number of local service providers for homeless people in the Belfast area and has developed a strong relationship with the homeless sector. A key feature of the work of the Centre is focused on providing an advocacy platform for homeless people in the city by giving voice to their personal experiences of homelessness. The Centre works closely with the Council for the Homeless in Northern Ireland (CHNI) and the Welcome Organisation.³

II HOMELESSNESS IN NORTHERN IRELAND - THE REALITY

4. In two photography exhibitions displayed in Belfast, Hidden Quarter (2010) and Hidden Voices (2011), The Westcourt Centre has documented the experience of

¹ The Council for the Homeless Northern Ireland (CHNI) was founded in 1983 and is the sole representative body for those working with homeless people across Northern Ireland www.chni.org.uk

The CHNI is a membership organisation whose members include the following: NB Housing (Flax & Filor) Abbey Surestart, NI Co-ownership Housing Association, Action Ability Belfast, NIAMH, Action for Children, NICEM - Belfast Migrant Centre, AGE North Down & Ards, NIFHA, An Munia Tober, NIID, Apex Housing, Northlands, Ark HA, Oaklee Trinity Ltd, Barnardos Leaving and Aftercare Project, Open Door, Belfast Central Mission, Praxis Care Group, Castle Living & Support Services, Presbyterian Church in Ireland, Cause, Probation Board of Northern Ireland, CITHRATH Foundation, Queens Quarter Housing (NI) Ltd, Clarendon Shelter, Regina Coeli, Community Health and Development Network, Rosemount House, De Paul Ireland, Rural Community Network, East Belfast Mission, Salvation Army, Extern, Shelter NI, Families Need Fathers, Simon Community NI, FHASS, Start 360.

² The Westcourt Centre in Belfast aims to promote social inclusion and reduce disadvantage through education. As part of the Edmund Rice Network, Westcourt is committed to working towards social justice by giving voice and support to people on the margins. Since 2008, Westcourt has been working with a number of local service providers for the homeless to support homeless people and help raise awareness of the issue of homelessness www.stillsomebody.org

³ The Welcome Organisation in Belfast is a voluntary body focused on the provision of services for homeless people www.homelessbelfast.org

homeless people in Belfast. The anecdotal evidence from this work has indicated the existence of a serious homelessness situation in Belfast, compounded by issues around addiction and mental health. For example, between February and March 2016 a number of vulnerable people were found dead in shop doorways in Belfast city centre. All of these victims of street death were receiving support from homeless services.

5. According to *The Homeless Monitor: Northern Ireland 2013* by Crisis UK, a survey conducted in Northern Ireland in 2012 established that some six percent of all adults in Northern Ireland had said that they had experienced homelessness, with 1.4 per cent saying that this had occurred in the previous five years. It also noted that 0.6 per cent of respondents were sleeping rough in temporary accommodation.

6. In the Westcourt Centre publication, *Word on the Street, Voices of Homelessness*, a number of Belfast homeless people have provided personal accounts of their experience of homelessness. The following are a brief quotes from homeless people who were interviewed:

One of the hardest things of being homeless was the attitude of other people towards me and the reactions of those whom I asked for help. Most people have the wrong idea of what it means to be homeless, simply put it means not having a home - nothing else (Daniel, 2013)

I ended up homeless. Not you're staying in a hostel kind of homeless; you're sleeping on the streets sleeping-bag, kind of homeless. I'm not going to bang on about but it is terrifying. The town is a very different place at night, a very different place (Erin, 2013)

III THE SITUATION: DATA

7. Housing is a basic human right as well as a social need. Current evidence is that the UK Government is failing to address effectively and strategically, the needs of homeless people in Northern Ireland and securing the fundamental right to adequate housing (Article 25.1 UDHR, Article 11.1 of ICESCR, UN OHCHR Fact Sheet 21).

8. Information provided by the Council for the Homeless Northern Ireland (CHNI), the Northern Ireland Executive Department for Communities (formerly the Department for Social Development) and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) indicates strongly that homelessness is a serious issue for many people. In addition, The Westcourt Centre (Edmund Rice Network) has worked with homeless service providers since 2008 and has developed anecdotal evidence directly from interviews with homeless people.

IV STATUTORY HOMELESSNESS

9. Since UK devolution of power to Wales and Scotland in 1999 there has been a divergence in the way each nation allocates housing to homeless people. Differences in the way in which homelessness statistics are gathered have also developed. This makes it difficult to correlate data across the UK as a whole. The statutory definition of homelessness differs across jurisdictions.

10. It is important to note that statutory homelessness refers primarily to households rather than individuals. While the term ‘homeless’ is often understood to refer to people ‘sleeping rough’, a household is deemed to be ‘statutorily homeless’ if it (or he, she, they) meets criteria established by relevant UK local authorities. In Northern Ireland statutory homelessness is assessed on the basis of four criteria. A person or persons who meet these criteria is/are deemed to be ‘full duty applicants’, that is persons in respect of whom the government incurs a statutory obligation.⁴

11. Statutory homelessness in Northern Ireland has remained at historically high levels since 2005/06. Many people live in accommodation that is run-down or overcrowded. Demand for affordable places to live is rising, and more people are seeking help with their housing. Others have lost their homes altogether.⁵

12. For 2014–15 Northern Ireland Government statistics show that 19,621 households presented as homeless to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. This represented an increase of 4 per cent from 2013-2014. The household types with the highest number of homeless presenters in 2014/15 included single males (35 per cent) and families (32 per cent).⁶

13. Of the number who presented as homeless (19,621) 11,016 people were accepted as statutorily homeless, as meeting the four criteria laid down by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) for eligibility to be classed as full duty applicants (FDA). A full duty applicant (FDA) is a housing applicant toward which the NIHE has a legal responsibility. The number accepted as statutorily homeless represented a fourteen percent increase on the year 2013–14.

14. Despite the complexities of local authority data gathering it is, nonetheless, clear that homelessness is a significant problem in Northern Ireland, even without the implementation of the Welfare Reform Act, which has seen homelessness presentations soar in other jurisdictions in the UK. The Chief Commissioner of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, Les Allamby, having reviewed the data, has commented in the Commission’s 2016 report to the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights:

Whilst this report to the United Nations interrogates a number of issues, we cannot lose sight of the fact that it is housing in Northern Ireland that takes up the bulk of the findings presented. It is concerning that the rates for statutory homelessness are higher here than anywhere elsewhere in the UK. We must also remember that homelessness goes much further than people living on the streets and covers people having to stay with friends, or living in other transient circumstances.

⁴ UK Department for Communities and Local Government https://socialwelfare.bl.uk/subject-areas/services-activity/housing-homelessness/departmentsforcommunitiesandlocalgovernment/1774282015_Q3_Statutory_Homelessness.pdf

⁵ Council for the Homeless Northern Ireland (CHNI) Homelessness Manifesto 2016

⁶ Source: Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission <http://www.nihrc.org/news/detail/northern-ireland-homelessness-highlighted-at-the-un>

15. As a group experiencing significant social exclusion in Northern Ireland, homeless people are all the more vulnerable because they present with complex needs. Service providers working with homeless people report that they represent an increasingly complex and challenging client group. This suggests a need for integrated services and an inter-departmental approach on the part of the Northern Ireland Government.

16. The Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) Homelessness Strategy for Northern Ireland 2012–2017 states that an integrated strategy is required with the relevant organisations working together to deliver housing, employment, health, financial support and welfare services to those who experience homelessness. However, crucially, the Northern Ireland Executive Draft Programme for Government Framework 2016–2021, published in May 2016, failed to outline a specific housing outcome in the Framework or a specific indicator to address the issue of statutory homelessness. This suggests little cross-department support for implementing a strategy to alleviate homelessness in Northern Ireland.

17. Homelessness is an extreme form of social exclusion and is a strong indicator of social injustice for any society. Homelessness is not a single problem but rather many different problems intertwined: lack of housing; lack of jobs; lack of money; lack of social support; lack of health care; lack of support for addiction and mental health; social exclusion and poverty amongst others.

18. People with complex needs are often failed by services, excluded from the help they need or fall between services which only deal with a single problem. The recent street deaths in Belfast referred to earlier are a tragic example of the failure to work together. Greater cohesion across government departments in the development of a social inclusion strategy to address the related problems of housing provision, homelessness, addiction and mental health, unemployment and under-employment as well as systemic poverty is essential.

RECOMMENDATIONS

19. In light of the foregoing and having regard to the human rights implications of homeless citizens in the United Kingdom, Edmund Rice International recommends that the United Kingdom government address the issue of homelessness in Northern Ireland by implementing the following measures:

- **Have cross-departmental investment to support early intervention and prevention;**
- **Ensure there are fewer barriers to accessing healthcare, addiction and mental health services, social services, employment, education and training; and**
- **Ensure close working relationships between Health, Social Security, the homelessness sector and addiction and mental health services.**

V FOOD POVERTY IN GREATER MANCHESTER

INTRODUCTION and CONTEXT

20. The right to food is a base human right recognised in international law and in various United Nations declarations and covenants. In the United Kingdom, based on evidence gathered in the Manchester, Salford and Merseyside areas, the existence of food poverty among the population is clear. This is attested primarily by the increasing number of people who access local food banks on a regular basis. Such evidence correlates with data from national organisations like Oxfam and the Trussell Trust. This evidence suggests strongly that the United Kingdom government is failing to meet its human rights obligations to support citizens in vindicating their right to food by implementing policies to eliminate food poverty and food insecurity.

21. According to the 2014 Oxfam report, *Below the Breadline*, developed jointly with The Trussell Trust, Oxfam and Church Action on Poverty a staggering 20 million meals were provided by these organisations to people in the UK who could not afford to feed themselves⁷ This represents a fifty-four per cent increase on the previous twelve month period.⁸ A member of the Edmund Rice Network who volunteers with the Wythenshaw Community Housing Group has also noted a similar increase in the number of meals provided in her local area.

22. The Reverend Adam Dickson, Assistant Curate of Wythenshaw Church of England team in written note has commented:

*Since our team ministry set up our food bank project, our volunteers have listened to many personal stories from the people we have served. The most common causes of food poverty we have heard about involve changes to benefits and difficulty in managing debt. One consistent thread in the conversations we've had is the profound feeling of distress, anxiety, and shame food poverty provokes, and this has been particularly evident among those with young children.*⁹

23. The Reverend Tim Nicholls, Methodist Minister, Bramhall and Wythenshaw Methodist Circuit, explains the relationship between food poverty and recent experiences arising from austerity and welfare reform:

Food poverty, was never such a significant issue before the austerity cuts of 2010. The government cynically and politically decided to attack the welfare budget, when this should have been ring fenced. The evidence is clear, that food poverty massively increased as a result of these cuts, by the surge in the numbers attending food banks. In the fourth largest economy in the World, the government has a moral duty to ensure that there is a sufficient safety net to prevent the most vulnerable members of society, and those who fall into hard times, to not suffer unduly, and do not go hungry. It was part of the social contract of the nation that the welfare state would be sufficient to prevent the five great evils of the Beveridge Report. One of which was hunger. That social

⁷ *Below The Breadline: The Relentless Rise of Food Poverty in Great Britain* (Oxfam 2014) p.4

⁸ *Walking The Breadline: The scandal of food poverty in 21st Century Britain* (Oxfam 2013) p.5

⁹ *Interview with Revd. Adam Dickson (15th July 2016)*

*contract was torn up by the government because they believe that poverty is the fault of poor people, and that the only way to get them out of poverty is to make their lives so dreadful they either starve to death, commit suicide or become reliant on charitable aid.*¹⁰

ARGUMENT

24. The evidence gathered strongly indicates that the United Kingdom Government is failing (a) to be proactive in eliminating food insecurity and (b) to secure the fundamental right of all to adequate food consistent with its obligations under Articles 22 and 25.1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 11.1 of the International Covenant for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Articles 24–27 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and Article 28 of the CRPD).

25. From a policy perspective it is clear that social protection measures have failed to address issues associated with increased poverty. According to Oxfam, in its *Below the Breadline* report, a combination of factors is stretching household budgets to breaking-point, rising food prices, high housing costs, increasing energy bills, low wages and insecure contracts. The report goes on to say:

*Forty per cent of low income households report being faced with the 'heat or eat' dilemma while twenty per cent of parents regularly say that they go without food to ensure that their children have enough to eat.*¹¹

ANALYSIS AND DATA

26. Data provided by the Wythenshaw Community Housing Group and the Trussell Trust indicates strongly that food insecurity is a serious issue for many people. Statistics from The Tree of Life Centre in Wythenshaw, South Manchester, show that local food banks (St Luke's, Royal Oak, Bideford Centre) distributed food parcels in 2013, 2014 and 2015 to 954 people, 2007 people and 1598 respectively. Based on a family of three, this means that 8586 meals were covered by food banks in the area in 2013, with 18423 covered in 2014 and 14382 covered in 2015 (Tree of Life Audit, 2015).¹²

27. In addition, the Edmund Rice Network UK, (which includes pupils from schools within the Edmund Rice network of schools in the United Kingdom) has provided anecdotal evidence of the existence of food poverty in the Manchester and Salford areas arising from their volunteer work with REVIVE (a support organisation for asylum seekers and refugees in the Manchester and Salford areas. This anecdotal evidence relates to users of food banks in these areas).¹³

¹⁰ Interview with Revd. Tim Nicholls (18th July 2016)

¹¹ *Below The Breadline: The Relentless Rise of Food Poverty in Great Britain* (Oxfam 2014) p.10

¹² *Tree of Life Audit* (Tree of Life, 2015)

¹³ *Students from St Ambrose College, Hale Barns, have collected and distributed food parcels to destitute asylum seekers and refugees since 2013.*

FOOD POVERTY - ITS ROOT CAUSES

28. The last UK government monitoring of food insecurity was the 2003–05 Low Income Diet and Nutrition Survey conducted by the Food Standards Agency.¹⁴ Despite the return of favourable economic conditions in the UK, reliance on charitable food banks continues to rise.¹⁵

The causes of food insecurity in the UK are largely attributable to the following factors:

- The low pay economy whereby many families fall into poverty and risk falling victim to food insecurity;¹⁶
- Regressive welfare provision which results in social security systems failing to guarantee the minimum right to food. The Trussell Trust estimates that 49 percent of people referred to food banks are there due to problems with social security payments or because they have been refused a crisis loan;¹⁷
- Benefit caps, benefit delays and benefit sanctions that drive people into acute poverty. 58 percent of sanctions decisions are successfully challenged, suggesting that many people needlessly suffer a loss of income through no fault of their own.¹⁸

29. Independent local food banks have emerged to respond to the needs of people in precarious situations. Many people who run and volunteer in food banks and soup kitchens indicate an urgent need to minimise demand for their emergency provision, in particular from working families for whom the level of the National Minimum Wage did not cover the costs of the major items in their budget. They expressed a similar anger for those users who had registered for benefits but then waited unimaginable lengths of time for their entitlement to come through.¹⁹ In its 2014 report, *Below The Breadline: The Relentless Rise of Food Poverty in Britain* OXFAM state: Protecting its citizens from going hungry is one of the most fundamental duties of government. Most of us have grown up with the assumption that when we fall on hard times, the social security safety net will kick in and prevent us from falling into destitution and hunger. The principle of this crucial safety net now appears to be under threat. Food banks, run by volunteer-based charities, provide food hand-outs to persons in acute need who are often referred by health and social care professionals.²⁰

30. The existence of these food banks and the steep rise in the number of people accessing emergency food supplies indicates the existence of a significant cohort of people consistently at risk of food insecurity.

31. However, food bank data alone provide an incomplete picture of food insecurity. Recipients of food bank support describe their experience as ‘embarrassing’, ‘humiliating’, ‘shameful’, ‘demeaning’. It is a last resort when other coping strategies have failed and carries a stigma associated with earlier eras of poverty. Many of those who go hungry, ‘go without’ to feed their children, skip or skimp meals, or rely on

¹⁴ *Low Income Diet and Nutrition Survey* (Food Standards Agency 2003-5)

¹⁵ *Time To Count The Hungry* (The Food Research Collaboration April 2016) p.2

¹⁶ *Low Income Diet and Nutrition Survey* (Food Standards Agency 2003-5).

¹⁷ *Below The Breadline: The Relentless Rise of Food Poverty in Great Britain* (Oxfam 2014) pp.16-17

¹⁸ *Below The Breadline: The Relentless Rise of Food Poverty in Great Britain* (Oxfam 2014) pp.16-17

¹⁹ *Feeding Britain (Food Poverty Inquiry, 2014)* p.35

²⁰ *Below The Breadline: The Relentless Rise of Food Poverty in Great Britain* (Oxfam 2014) pp.6

unsatisfactory cheap processed foods, never appear in food bank statistics. The Food Foundation reports: “Our data show that 17 times the number using Trussell Trust food banks are food insecure. This is because people may use non-Trussell Trust food banks, or more likely, because many people don’t access food assistance at all.”²¹

32. Independent research into destitution in the UK by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation estimates the number of people living in severe poverty and unable to adequately feed, clothe, or house themselves and their families, as 1.25 million people, including over 300,000 children.²²

33. It is puzzling for many that significant levels of food insecurity should exist in an advanced country such as the United Kingdom where considerable investment has been made in the provision of welfare services. However, government policies designed to address the need for a structural reform of the welfare provision has had a direct and very negative impact on welfare service users. The UK Government’s programme of welfare reform has had the aim not only of cutting public expenditure on welfare programmes but also of reducing welfare dependency and incentivising work by freezing and capping social security benefits. Reform measures need to be consistent with respect for fundamental human rights, including the right to food. The state party has an overriding duty to ensure the minimum conditions consistent with the possibility of a decent life for all. This entails an obligation on the state party to monitor and mitigate deficits in food provision.

34. At present the rolling back of social services, the decline in real wages, increases in food costs coupled with an emphasis within the 2015 Conservative manifesto to develop food production in this country as an export (as opposed to subsidising it in order to feed the nation), suggests that this obligation is not one that is being taken seriously. In the manifesto, the only mention of food justice is expressed via the following phrase: “We have always believed that churches, faith groups and other voluntary groups play an important and longstanding role in this country’s social fabric, running food banks, helping the homeless and tackling debt and addictions, such as alcoholism and gambling. In the short term it is evident that the public will need to rely on each other to support the most vulnerable, which includes the elderly and children.”²³

35. Food bank provision is no more than a partial measure of food poverty and insecurity, however. Poor health outcomes arising from acute poverty is also an indicator of the level of the prevalence of food insecurity.²⁴

36. The thrust of the evidence from both food bank and health services indicates the prevalence of food insecurity. This food insecurity is the result of acute poverty and is

²¹ *Too Poor To Eat: Food Insecurity in the UK* (Food Foundation, May 2016) p.6

²² *Destitution in the UK* (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, April 2016) 91pp

²³ *A Nation of Inequality: How the UK is failing to feed its most vulnerable people* (Megan Blake, The Independent, 25th May 2015)

²⁴ “There are an estimated 3 million malnourished people in the UK at any time, with many more at risk of becoming malnourished.” *In Manchester, where malnutrition is reported to be twice the national average, Tameside Hospital became the first NHS hospital to open a permanent food bank* (<http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-34777348>).

not the result of adverse economic circumstances but rather arises from aspects of regressive welfare administration and reform policies. The failure of the State Party to monitor food insecurity and to develop policies to remediate the situation contravenes basic human rights of vulnerable people.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the foregoing and having regard to the human rights implications of the situation of citizens in the United Kingdom who are experiencing food insecurity, Edmund Rice International recommends that the United Kingdom government address the existence of food insecurity by implementing the following measures:

- **Enact such legislation as is necessary to protect citizens against food insecurity;**
- **Incorporate where necessary the provisions of relevant human rights conventions;**
- **Put in place structures and mechanisms to provide for the thorough collection of data relating to food insecurity in the United Kingdom**