

# The Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power: an evaluation

The Commission was set up by the UK Coalition Against Poverty (UKCAP) in 1999, following a UK-wide consultation process, to examine why people experiencing poverty do not influence decision-making and policy. Its 50/50 UK-wide membership consisted of six grassroots people with direct experience of poverty, and six people in public life. People sharing the same commitment, but with different expertise and knowledge, were thus brought together at the national level. The aim was to produce a different kind of report, rooted in real experience and in 'street language', through a different kind of commission process. The Commission reported in December 2000. This evaluation examines the Commission's history and process.



Precedents for the Commission did not exist. It was both a formal process, with a structure, programme, timetable and specific output, and an informal one, requiring flexibility, mutual understanding and respect, an engagement at both personal and professional levels, and equal contributions from all participants.



The evaluation produced the following lessons:

- recruitment of participants needs to be open and accountable, to ensure legitimacy and support for participants, both inside and outside the process.
- clear and agreed objectives/terms of reference, preparation and advance planning are crucial. Participants need to be clear about what they are 'signing up' to, including the participatory processes involved. In this case, development and social time for discussion, reflection and mutual knowledge would have been helpful, particularly at the start.
- chairing, agenda formation and overall workplan, the role of staff, the collection of evidence, the report-writing process and publication/ dissemination need to be debated and agreed from the beginning.
- efficient practical support for grassroots participants - travel, accommodation and up-front payments - is vital. Early difficulties could otherwise be perceived as a (negative) symbol of these participants' value.



The researchers conclude that:

- a truly participatory and equal process requires openness, high levels of commitment and new ways of working, which can be stressful and time-consuming. In this case, most participants felt that the experience of the Commission had been difficult but also creative, exciting, energising, producing a good and 'different' result and much personal learning for all. Grassroots commissioners had *driven* the process, but everyone contributed fully;
- much can be learnt from the Commission about involving grassroots people in policy development, nationally and locally. Particular lessons emerged about how to involve on equal terms people with direct experience of poverty.

## Origins of the Commission

The Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power followed a two-year project called 'Voices for Change'. Both projects were set up by the UK Coalition against Poverty (UKCAP), founded in 1996. UKCAP was based on two principles:

- Consulting with people experiencing poverty should be a participatory process.
- Formal groups should have 50/50 membership of 'grassroots' people and others.

This evaluation examines how the Commission did its work. The learning from this is transferable, locally and nationally, to many other structured methods of participation, especially by excluded groups. The views of those involved became clearer and more positive over time, especially at the final workshop in January 2002. These *Findings* and the full report aim to reflect this learning as well as the early reactions to the process.

## Membership

The Voices for Change project was set up as a grassroots process to work participatively with people and communities experiencing poverty across the UK. It was intended to identify key issues that influence whether people are involved in decisions affecting their lives. It was expected to provide both evidence and support for the Commission, which was planned as the second stage of this process.

The Commission itself began work in autumn 1999. Its six 'grassroots' and six 'public life' commissioners were drawn from across the UK. They were appointed as individuals for their personal expertise, that is, for their direct experience of poverty and/or their practical, political and theoretical knowledge. A few had also experienced the process of participation, either in local communities or as academics and consultants.

Only three grassroots commissioners had been involved in Voices for Change. Its area groups of local representatives had nominated grassroots and some public life commissioners, but these groups were rather weak and could only provide limited support.

## Costs and resources

The Commission's budget, excluding inputs 'in kind', was £45,000, mainly funded by JRF. Extra, unanticipated activities added to overall costs. Costs were minimised for room hire and refreshments, but travel and accommodation were more problematic. Realistic budgeting, better anticipation of extra financial needs, and the ability to negotiate openly and flexibly with funders would have improved cost effectiveness.

## Making it work

The commissioners expected to make a contribution based on their experience and aiming for a report that 'would not sit on the shelf'. Time was precious.

Yet the meetings could not be on traditional, formal lines. Everyone brought different kinds of 'baggage': expectations, preconceptions, priorities, personal power, experience, anxieties and concerns. Ideally, these should have been consciously included and responded to in the meetings, so as to develop trust, mutual respect and knowledge. This would have enabled grassroots commissioners to play a full part and take the lead, and public life commissioners' contributions to be fully valued. For this to happen, appropriate chairing and adequate development time were needed.

### Chairing

The UK Steering Group, which set up the Commission, left the decision about chairing to the Commission. At its second meeting, the commissioners decided not to appoint one of themselves. A staff member was asked to act as meetings-only chair - to act as 'umpire' or 'referee', but not to take decisions or be too directive. No one therefore had authority to steer the process, or to ensure the effective use of time and 'parity of esteem'.

### Development and 'social time'

Some commissioners took a long time to feel 'safe' about contributing, especially in the early meetings. Much activity and learning took place throughout, but only at the sixth meeting did the Commission 'gel' into a working team: '*commitment was the glue - and it showed*' (Commissioner).

At the start, commissioners had little time to get to know one another or to develop ground rules. Tight agendas and long travelling distances meant there was hardly any 'social time'. Practical and emotional difficulties were not thrashed out. Certain commissioners (grassroots and public life) felt 'silenced'.

Interviewees felt that a 48-hour pre-Commission residential meeting would have helped develop mutual knowledge, understanding and respect. Ground rules, a work plan, and key questions of chairing, staffing and report writing could have been discussed and agreed.

## What were commissioners 'signing up' to?

### Terms of reference

The first three meetings raised a recurrent tension between a focus on 'poverty' and a focus on 'participation', resulting in the Commission's title

being changed, while a more user-friendly version of the terms of reference was written. The main focus was clarified as being to investigate and explore solutions to the barriers faced by people experiencing poverty when participating in policy and decision-making processes.

### *Commission activities*

The Commission undertook:

- eight **Commission meetings** to consider evidence from Voices for Change, their own experience, and other data;
- seven **visits** around the UK to hear from grassroots communities and projects;
- seven meetings with national **policy-makers** (civil servants, politicians and one policy advisor).

Each visit and meeting involved at least one grassroots and one public life commissioner. The visits proved particularly useful in progressing the work and raising the Commission's profile.

### *Participatory processes*

Participatory processes can ensure that everyone, whatever their skills, knowledge and background, has enough confidence to contribute equally, as was expected for this Commission.

However, despite pre-planning and the use of a skilled facilitator, participatory processes were not intrinsic to the Commission. They had not been explicitly agreed with prospective commissioners. At the first meeting, one commissioner objected to a group exercise and the lack of mutual trust in the early stages led to most subsequent sessions being plenary.

Commissioners were not aiming for 'cosy consensus'. However, unmanaged tensions arose which were harmful. The personal power of some individuals was divisive. Some people 'held back'. The unresolved difficulties relating to the chairing role and a collective reluctance to intervene undoubtedly exacerbated this problem. This experience suggests that if everyone is genuinely to be involved on equal terms, participatory processes must be negotiated and clarified with participants from the beginning. The alternative, suggested by some interviewees impatient with the process as experienced, is strong chairing and central control. This might have been more effective in controlling and encouraging different commissioners' inputs and completing the long agendas, but it would not have been consistent with the values underlying the '50/50' method.

## **Supporting the Commission and the commissioners**

### *Supporting the Commission*

UKCAP was responsible for administration and support. Oxfam GB provided the facilitator and a minute-taker/policy adviser. Church Action on Poverty (CAP) provided support and advice, and the unforeseen chairing role. Professional policy advisers/writers were employed to assemble evidence and write the report. Commissioners were unclear about the respective roles of the UKCAP, Oxfam and CAP workers, whose time working for the Commission was not agreed in advance. This resulted in false expectations of who was responsible and available to do what. Ideally, staff support needs to be clarified and negotiated with the participants, with flexibility to meet new needs.

### *Supporting the commissioners*

It was recognised from the start that grassroots commissioners would need local support to enable them to be effective in a process that was new to all of them, but only one commissioner actually received this throughout.

Systematic and efficient practical support from the centre was also needed. Commissioners reported receiving long papers too late. Several commissioners needed up-front cash to pay for travel and accommodation. UKCAP depended on its host organisation, and struggled to send out cash advances or post urgent mail.

Staff tried to fill the gap (sometimes from their own pockets), but the commissioners perceived *ad hoc* responses, rather than anticipation of their practical problems. This mattered, symbolising to some commissioners that, despite the efforts of the highly committed staff, grassroots people were not being valued as they should.

This suggests that individual commissioners' needs should be explicitly checked at the beginning and regularly reviewed. *All* commissioners would then feel confident that needs – their own and others' – were being recognised and responded to.

## **Final reflections**

The preceding comments reflect many of the real difficulties faced by the Commission, which would need to be taken into account in similar participation processes. However, once the raw experience of being on the Commission had begun to fade, more positive feelings emerged (a few interviewees had seen these tensions as normal for this type of process). They had valued the experience and been energised by it.

The experiential nature of this '*extraordinary process*' (*Commissioner*), the informality, laughter, passion, real honesty and energy were major features

that distinguish this from other commissions. This was no ordinary set of meetings but a series of dynamic, unpredictable and often exhausting encounters, with a constant tension between seeking good processes and achieving intended outcomes.

Most commissions gather people together, study 'evidence' and then issue a report. This Commission was about dealing with exchanges *between* commissioners and learning from that. Personal experience and academic theory had the same status. Although several commissioners felt like withdrawing at different times, none did so because of their commitment not to let down people experiencing poverty - they 'showed and stayed' (many commissioners had experienced 'show and go' by politicians and officials). Most of them felt that it had been interesting, even exciting. They had made huge personal journeys.

The Commission itself became a process with its own unanticipated 'human dynamic'. Conflict and tensions were unavoidable, since they were based on '*contested notions of truth, reality, method and language*' (staff). Such experiences involve exposure, vulnerability and threat. It became clear to the 'public life' commissioners that they could not simply stick to their professional role, as they would in other environments. If they were really going to tackle power relations, there was an unexpected personal aspect. They had to open themselves up and connect with feelings and emotions - their own and others'. They *all* learnt that people in poverty 'owned' and were affected by the process in a far more fundamental way than the public life commissioners.

Despite the traumas, almost all stakeholders felt that the report was worthwhile, and different from what would have been achieved without grassroots involvement. The report was generally seen as offering different insights in a different tone - it speaks from the heart and 'touches' people, avoids 'policy speak', and tries to overcome the deep mistrust felt by people on the receiving end of policies. The report was radically rewritten and 'translated' into 'street language' so as to reflect the rich learning from the Commission's work. At the review session in January 2002, grassroots commissioners reiterated that the report reflected first hand experience. The 'voices' were *heard* and not 'translated' by others. They had been accepted as professionals. Everyone felt this had been a genuinely joint process, living the principles of their own report: 'participation' had not been phoney.

**'In the Commission, we found the true guts of what equality, respect and participation is all about.'**  
(Commissioner)

Commissioners were concerned about the lack of time to plan dissemination and follow-up. However, by early 2002, all commissioners were using the report as a tool for action - from meetings with ministers, to local workshops for elected members; from speeches and academic writing, to meetings with local groups on the ground.

### About the project

The evaluation was carried out by Sarah Del Tufo and Lucy Gaster of the Evaluation Trust. It lasted from June 2000 to March 2001. It included observation of Commission meetings, a group evaluation session for commissioners and staff, individual semi-structured interviews and the study of minutes, Commission and Voices for Change papers. The draft final evaluation report was circulated to all interviewees for comment. A final workshop for interviewees and some UKCAP members was held in January 2002.

### How to get further information

The full report, **Evaluation of the Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power** by Sarah del Tufo and Lucy Gaster is published for the Foundation by YPS (ISBN 1 84263 033 4, price £15.95).