

# Engaging public support for eradicating UK poverty

Round-up  
Reviewing the evidence

September 2009

Surveys suggest that public attitudes towards those experiencing poverty are harshly judgemental or view poverty and inequality as inevitable. But when people are better informed about inequality and life on a low income, they are more supportive of measures to reduce poverty and inequality.

## This paper:

- examines attitudes to poverty, what influences them, and ways to build public support for anti-poverty measures;
- draws on the findings of the JRF Public Interest in Poverty Issues programme.

## Key points

- Public awareness of the extent and reality of UK poverty is limited. People often see it as the individual's responsibility to get out of poverty because they are not aware of the obstacles to achieving this.
- Communication needs to highlight solutions to poverty and inequality to demonstrate that change is possible and shift attitudes that current poverty and inequality levels in the UK are inevitable.
- Real-life stories and the voice of people with experience of poverty are effective and powerful in engaging the public, but they are severely under-represented in media coverage. Third sector organisations can help them to use media opportunities including new interactive media to share their views and experiences and also respond to inaccurate and misleading coverage. However, poverty and being in receipt of benefits are stigmatised, so people are reluctant to speak out.
- There is significant interest in poverty issues among some journalists and others in the media but current media coverage of poverty is limited and often tends to be stereotypical in approach. New programme formats are needed which build on current trends to contrast extremes of UK inequality, and go on to explore the causes and consequences of and solutions to poverty.
- Relatively little work by government, public or private sectors or third sector organisations aims specifically to engage the public in anti-poverty debates and build positive attitudes towards poverty reduction measures.
- Effective communication on poverty needs to address legitimate public concerns, including fears that anti-poverty measures may result in increased taxes, and misconceptions that people receiving benefits do not contribute to society.
- A long-term programme involving government, civil society, media and private sector organisations is needed for sustained attitude change and to build public awareness that solutions to poverty need a society-wide response.

## Author

Teresa Hanley, Joseph Rowntree Foundation

## Introduction

This *Round-up* looks at public attitudes to poverty and inequality, and how to engage the public in supporting anti-poverty measures. It draws on findings from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) programme on Public Interest in Poverty Issues. This programme aimed to equip those building public support for eradicating UK poverty with relevant research findings on people's attitudes and their implications for engaging the public (see list of reports at the end of this *Round-up*). The programme also produced practical tools such as a guide and website resource for journalists and journalism educators on reporting poverty (Seymour, 2008, and [www.jrf.org.uk/reporting-poverty](http://www.jrf.org.uk/reporting-poverty), autumn 2009), and held workshops to pool cross-sector experience and discuss future options on how to build public support.

The programme's main themes were:

- public attitudes to poverty and inequality;
- influences and drivers of attitudes, such as media and political discourse;
- what works in engaging the public in debate on poverty and inequality;
- the potential of alternative frameworks, such as human rights, to broaden the range of organisations involved in anti-poverty dialogue;
- implications of current attitudes for communicators.

The programme's context was initially characterised by government calls for more support for measures to address poverty. Further reducing UK poverty beyond the levels achieved would require a step change. Different measures may need more government spending and involvement by a greater range of players.

The Public Interest in Poverty Issues programme ran from 2007 alongside other relevant JRF programmes. It was known that it would precede a general election (expected in 2010). Less expected was the evolving context that included the financial crisis and related debates such as that surrounding high earners' salaries and also the abolition of the 10p tax band. There have been many anti-poverty campaigns and coalitions during the period of the programme. Levels of poverty have now begun to plateau, however, and in some cases increase. At the same time, the media environment has been evolving rapidly and there is greater economic pressure on the media to gain high audiences in an increasingly competitive environment.

The findings on attitudes presented here are mainly taken from pre-recession studies, though Bamfield and Horton's report (2009) included work carried out during late 2008/early 2009 and thus caught some of the impact of the financial crisis. As in previous recessions, the implication is that the public are more open to debating causes of and solutions to poverty as it becomes a state closer to many people, with rising job insecurity and personal financial pressures. Support for measures to assist those on low incomes is greater during difficult financial times. However, this increase in support for anti-poverty measures is often time-limited to the recession.

# Public attitudes to UK poverty and inequality

## Why are public attitudes important?

Public attitudes inform the level of support for action by government and others to tackle poverty. While public support does not always translate into government policy, greater support is certainly more likely to result in sustained and increased action by all levels of government to take measures that will tackle poverty.

As reductions in poverty in the UK have now levelled off, future policy implementation to reduce poverty further is likely to involve a greater range of people from the public and private sectors and civil society. Their attitudes to people in poverty and to poverty in general will be important in affecting how successful any policy implementation will be.

## Experiencing discrimination

These two examples from a workshop on experiencing discrimination, where a group of people living in poverty explored their experiences, are taken from the JRF *Viewpoint* by Damian Killeen (2008, p2):

Parents described the problems faced by their children at school. These included dinner ladies telling children that their parents were lazy and giving them the worst of the food to eat. Being bullied was a common experience often connected with children not having the 'right' clothes or trainers.

One woman described a catalogue of difficulties she had experienced in getting an appropriate response to her child's educational needs. She said that only one social worker had been sympathetic to her efforts; that social worker had said she understood the difficulties because she had been brought up on a similar estate.

The following quotes are from participants in 'Communicating Poverty' workshops organised by the UK Coalition Against Poverty (2008):

“... one of the things about being in poverty, you feel that people are looking and saying he's not very good or whatever, I'm better than you.”

“... you are frightened to say you are poor.”

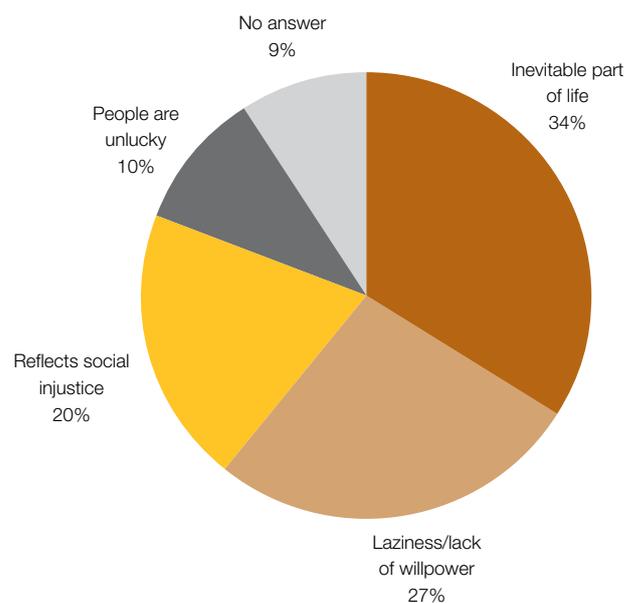
Furthermore, public attitudes have a direct impact on the day-to-day experience of people who are experiencing poverty. Those on low incomes commonly describe experiences where they feel discriminated against because of their situation. Poverty is a stigmatising label that few are comfortable to adopt.

## What are public attitudes to poverty and inequality?

The annual British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey includes questions relevant to poverty. The answers to these show widespread belief that poverty in the UK is either inevitable or an individual's own fault (BSA, 2008), as illustrated by Figure 1. The trend of judging individuals as creators of their own poverty seems to be increasing. This presents a challenging starting point for communicators aiming to build support for anti-poverty measures.

Figure 1: Beliefs on reasons for poverty (BSA, 2008)

Why do you think there are people in need?



Participants in JRF workshops to discuss poverty, attitudes and communication frequently raised the point that attitudes to wealth, and not just poverty, need to be considered. While the nature of poverty is very different from 50 years ago in the UK and from absolute poverty in developing countries, not having what most people take for granted is what many find difficult. Perhaps the starkest examples are the cases of parents going without or falling into debt so their children can have what others have, or their children being bullied at school for not having the latest trend.

Concerning attitudes to economic inequality, the literature review by Orton and Rowlingson (2007) found a seemingly contradictory picture of widespread and sustained public dissatisfaction with the income gap in the UK, but no corresponding support for suggested measures to address it. While over 70 per cent of the population consider income distribution to be too wide, and in particular people on high incomes to be paid too much, polls show no corresponding support for redistributive measures to reduce this gap. Furthermore, Orton and Rowlingson's review (2007) found that despite abundant statistical information on people's attitudes at any one time (usually based on polls and surveys), there is very limited research to explain attitudes, for instance looking at why they change and what drives them.

Qualitative research by Bamfield and Horton (2009) found a more complex picture around public attitudes than polls suggest. Despite general acceptance of a degree of inequality, based on the belief that some high salaries were earned, the authors also found an underlying trend of support for measures that address inequalities in life chances. Assumptions about top earnings and whether these were deserved, however, were shaken by the financial crisis in late 2008 and the questions it raised about the high salaries of some groups, such as city bankers and traders.

Support for measures to address economic inequality depended on people's understanding of the obstacles to upwards social mobility faced by people on low incomes (Bamfield and Horton, 2009). It was also influenced by beliefs around whether recipients of support, be it benefits or targeted programmes, would contribute back to society. More worryingly for campaigners and policy-makers was the widely held view that people on benefits, particularly Jobseeker's Allowance, do not and will not make a reciprocal contribution to society. There was a widespread lack of awareness of the current contributions people on benefits make to their community and the obstacles often faced by people on low incomes. This creates a major communication challenge for those trying to build public support for measures that tackle poverty and inequality.

## Policy implications of public attitudes

There is a debate on the extent to which attitudes should drive policy or whether policy and other activities should aim to change attitudes. The impetus here for understanding public attitudes is to enhance efforts to build public support for anti-poverty measures. When attitudes are based on misconceptions or limited information these gaps in information need to be filled. However, the risk is that by highlighting existing attitudes, policy-makers will be tempted to

design policies to accord with them, even when they are not based on facts. Similarly, some in the media and elsewhere may take a statement of attitudes to be a statement of facts (e.g. most people believe there are enough opportunities for everyone, therefore there are).

Some people express concern that expenditure on poverty, and benefits in particular, will be wasted and lead to abuse, benefit fraud and people not taking opportunities to help themselves. Direct confrontation of such attitudes is rarely effective, but acknowledging that these are legitimate concerns that can and are being addressed is more likely to work. As attitudes are often based on limited, partial or incorrect information, fuller provision of information on the real state of affairs is needed. Many see this as a role that government should lead on.

Research for the Public Interest in Poverty Issues programme found widespread public concern with inequality in the UK. People felt that inequality was fuelling growing pressure to purchase more. This, combined with a sense of financial insecurity influenced in part by globalisation and its associated global job market and more recently the financial crisis, has served to increase public unease with inequality. Furthermore, Bamfield and Horton (2009) found widely held views supporting suggestions that inequality leads to negative aspects of society such as increased crime and child conflict such as bullying. As such, they found widespread support for measures that tackle inequality – particularly targeted measures, as these appealed to a sense of fairness – but also a sense that they would benefit wider society as well as those on low incomes.

Bamfield and Horton (2009) also found a complex range of views on income inequality that crossed traditional 'left-right' political polarities. They identified the following four groups from their polling:

- *'Traditional egalitarians'* (22 per cent of respondents) supported measures to tackle inequality at both top and bottom of the income spectrum, believing high salaries to be more than is needed and that people on low incomes sometimes require external support to overcome the obstacles they face. These people tended to be older and more heavily weighted towards Labour than the country as a whole; 55 per cent were in socio-economic groups C2DE.
- *'Traditional free-marketeters'* (20 per cent) opposed measures to tackle inequality at the top (e.g. higher taxation) and the bottom (e.g. higher benefits or measures to support people on low incomes to overcome obstacles). They were overwhelmingly in socioeconomic groups ABC1 (70 per cent); members of this group were much more heavily weighted towards the Conservatives than the country as a whole.

- *'The angry middle'* (26 per cent) supported measures to tackle inequality at the top (e.g. through higher taxation) and viewed high salaries as often undeserved, but also opposed measures to tackle inequality at the bottom (e.g. more support for people on low incomes). They were slightly more weighted towards the Conservatives than the country as a whole; 53 per cent were in socioeconomic groups ABC1
- *'Post-ideological liberals'* (32 per cent) supported certain measures to tackle inequality at the top, such as higher taxation (although they had more positive attitudes towards those at the top than did traditional egalitarians, seeing high salaries as deserved). However, they did not have negative attitudes towards those in poverty, nor were they opposed to tackling inequality at the bottom (unlike traditional free-marketeters and the angry middle). Post-ideological liberals tended to be younger and less strongly opinionated than those in the other groups. They tended to vote Conservative and Labour in equal numbers; 52 per cent were in socioeconomic groups ABC1.

These groupings indicate the need for the debate on tackling poverty and inequality to go beyond a traditional 'left-right' political axis with 'egalitarians' and 'free-marketeters' the main participants. Rather, there is a need to include the more complex views of the majority of the population who fall into the other two groups. Many in these groups support measures to tackle inequality 'at the top'. The groupings also imply the need for advocates of anti-poverty measures to better understand where people's starting stance might be, since some arguments – particularly needs-based and more egalitarian ones – will not carry much weight with many members of the public they may wish to influence.

## Influences on attitudes

A range of factors inform attitudes. Public political debate, media coverage and, most importantly, people's own experience of poverty impact on their views about its causes, solutions and responsibilities for tackling it.

Parks et al (2007) analysed poll statistics to reveal who had what attitude. Rather than any demographic characteristic, they found that the most important factor in determining someone's attitude to poverty and beliefs about its causes and solutions tended to be whether they had had experience of poverty or contact with it. Those with experience of poverty tended to be associated with views that the causes of poverty are structural, and solutions were therefore often beyond

the individual's power. Those without experience of or contact with poverty often held individuals somehow responsible for their poverty.

Some key factors influencing attitudes relate to people's beliefs and their awareness of current trends. Most important in relation to tackling poverty and inequality seem to be the following:

- levels of awareness of the obstacles to upward social mobility faced by people on low incomes;
- understanding, beliefs and/or lack of awareness about the real distribution of income and tax burden;
- strong beliefs across income bands that their own income is 'middle income';
- beliefs in the inevitability of the status quo or whether change is possible;
- beliefs about whether beneficiaries of state support make a reciprocal contribution to society, or will in the future.

Analysis of public political debate on issues relating to poverty and inequality by Sheldon et al (2009) found major gaps in the public discourse of the main political parties. In particular, none of them seemed to be putting forward analysis to explain causes and solutions of poverty or inequality which linked with proposals for economic growth, upwards social mobility and combined economic and social policy. Equality in opportunity was often referred to, but equality itself rarely defined. When inequality was referred to, it was usually in relation to measures for and responsibilities of people in poverty. It was rare to find reference to measures of relevance to high earners. This emphasis on responsibilities of those on low incomes can reinforce dominant attitudes, which doubt that people receiving benefits are fulfilling responsibilities.

Political discourse tends to couch itself in terms appealing to 'the middle ground', which is where most people locate themselves whether they are on an income that is low or, as Polly Toynbee found in work with city bankers and lawyers, earning well over £100,000 (Toynbee and Walker, 2008, p34). This focus on 'the middle' and 'ordinary people' can distance and exclude those who are in poverty. Poverty is presented and perceived as someone else's issue. Inequality, on the other hand, is an issue that many people relate to – maybe in part because of their sense that they are 'in the middle'. For this reason it can provide a way into debate on poverty and inequality that a focus on poverty alone finds more difficult.

Word of mouth is one of the most trusted sources of information and thus a channel for changing attitudes. Many people have lost trust in politicians' rhetoric, official statistics and the media. A research team from Ipsos Mori found that people will even rationalise statistics they believe but which go against their beliefs, reaching for outlandish explanations to account for the dissonance from their view:

**They probably don't wear coats because it's fashionable not to.**

**People in Cornwall don't need so much money – they can go out and cut trees down for fuel. (Castell and Thompson, 2007, p17)**

Other Mori research found that 92 per cent of the UK population identify word of mouth as their best source of ideas and information (Duffy and Pierce, 2007, p1). Hence other campaigns and public engagement initiatives (such as energy-saving week) focus on this technique, aiming to stimulate 'one million conversations' rather than running large-scale media activities. Stimulating debate around the kitchen table, in the workplace or with friends may be a key part of challenging and changing attitudes. In the words of Brendan Barber, General Secretary of the Trades Union Congress (Barber, Devaney and Stroud, 2009):

**Many of us will remember the first time we acted out the principle of "never let a racist comment go unchallenged"; perhaps we need to take that first step next time we hear a joke about 'chavs'.**

Delvaux and Rinne (2009) found that programmes which enable contact and interaction between different communities or people from different backgrounds are the most effective. Examples include:

- programmes that provide opportunities for community engagement such as volunteering;
- real dialogue such as King's College and ATD Fourth World's programme for social worker training involving people with experiences of poverty;
- Business in the Community's initiative for business leaders, 'Seeing is Believing'.

Such programmes give the chance to go beyond engaging the public by 'messaging'; instead, they enable dialogue on the obstacles and opportunities that people face. They also provide concrete ways for people to become directly involved in changing society and to support broader anti-poverty measures by government and others. Similarly, Delvaux and Rinne found successful examples of poverty awareness training, some of which has been run in the public sector as well as other organisations. These give staff the opportunity to debate and develop understanding of causes of poverty, possible solutions and the relevance to their own organisation and role. They have proved effective in building understanding and support for anti-poverty measures. Examples include training by Gateshead Housing Company, Dundee City Council, Sports Glasgow with Poverty Alliance, and the Northern Ireland Anti-Poverty Network with schools, Jobcentre Plus staff, church groups and others.

### Poverty awareness training

Poverty awareness training by the Poverty Alliance and others usually involves a half-day or one-day session promoted through publicity, but also through an in-house 'champion' and word of mouth. Training involves:

- a quiz and other interactive, fun methods;
- real-life stories and sometimes individuals with experience of poverty;
- in-depth, small-group discussions to explore the issue and its relevance for participants' work.

Impact has been shown in participants' feedback, changes in their work and requests from other local authorities and groups for training. The challenge is in how to replicate the effectiveness of these small-scale initiatives on a large scale. Funding for these initiatives has also proved difficult to find.

The media is a major influence on public debate, in being both reflectors and shapers of attitudes. The next section considers media coverage of poverty and how it impacts on public attitudes.

# The potential of the media

**Poverty is worthy but not newsworthy. (Journalist, Robinson et al, 2009, p10)**

The media are important in efforts to build public support for addressing poverty for a number of reasons. The media can connect people with no first-hand experience of it to the reality of poverty. They also have a significant impact on how people with experience of poverty view themselves. The media provide an arena where poverty and inequality can be debated, or such debates neglected.

**They talk about deprived communities as though the people in them created them. (Anti-poverty campaigner, Robinson et al, 2009, p13)**

Trends in the media environment are significant for what opportunities they provide to build public support for anti-poverty measures. First, it is a fast-changing scene characterised by rapid growth in the availability and range of television and radio channels, including easy access to channels broadcast outside the UK. Secondly, there are now many opportunities for direct public participation in the media, such as radio phone-ins, chances to 'have your say', and digital and new media methods for creating and transmitting content via the internet, mobile phones, blogs, films and audio. Thirdly, media consumption habits are also changing. On-demand media mean that the days of a large proportion of the country watching the same programme at the same time are almost gone, so arguably the potential for a 'Cathy Come Home moment', when a single programme impacts on the nation's consciousness, has also gone.

Print media are experiencing many changes too. Staff reductions, the growth of free newspapers, the shift to the internet as well as distrust of the media and declining circulations have all contributed to cut-throat competition. In turn, this places heavy demands on journalists to produce more copy, earlier, for a greater number of formats and media (print, website, blog, feature) and results in less time in the community identifying stories and making contacts. Journalists' backgrounds have also changed; they are now far less likely to have direct experience of or contact with poverty (Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, 2009).

These changes have resulted in an overall reduction in investigative reporting. They have also changed how other organisations may work with the media to inform public opinion – closing some opportunities, but opening many new routes.

The review of media coverage by McKendrick et al (2008) found that poverty does feature in media reporting, but not a lot. In over 40 hours of television viewed, poverty

was mentioned directly only twice. In a week's review of more than 325 newspapers, radio and television programmes, magazines and new media, poverty in the UK was referred to directly or indirectly through another name 297 times, less frequently than references to poverty outside the UK (343). This number is tiny for such a widespread issue, considering that just one newspaper often carries more than 300 stories overall.

Sunday broadsheet newspapers were the most likely outlet to report on poverty, and national media more likely to cover the subject than regional or local media. The catalyst for coverage tended to be an event such as a government or research report, with heavy emphasis on government targets and progress towards them. In non-news coverage, the likes of soap operas, reality TV and drama programmes depicting 'real-life' situations often dealt with people on low incomes, but rarely mentioned poverty by name or showed extremes of poverty. It was unusual to find media coverage of poverty investigating causes and solutions and looking in more depth at experiences of it.

UK reporting on poverty contrasts with UK media coverage of international issues, where it is more common to find in-depth and innovative approaches; the *Guardian's* Katine project reporting long-term from a Ugandan village is a notable approach. Poverty outside the UK receives equal and at times more coverage than poverty in the UK.

Poverty is referred to, but often in a peripheral way linked to other stories about, for instance, health, crime and communities. McKendrick et al (2008) found that reporting styles were 'tired', using clichéd metaphors and familiar approaches often focusing on people who can be portrayed as heroes, villains or victims. They also found that journalists quite often used stereotypical pictures and words to refer to people living in poverty.

**There is very little sympathetic portrayal of poor people. And people are looking for reassuring images, that things are OK, things are fair and that people at the bottom are there because it's their fault and therefore we've all earned on merit our position. (Political commentator, daily broadcast)**

A number of participants in the qualitative research by Spectacle productions (2009), Robinson et al (2009) and McKendrick et al (2008) voiced concerns that poverty is being made into a spectator sport. They felt that the situations which people on low incomes have to deal with are presented as entertainment for the broader public. People with experience of poverty voiced anger at how stigmatising they found some media coverage, and a sense of powerlessness about how to address inaccurate coverage.

## Is poverty becoming a spectator sport?

Essentially when you boil it down, people are getting entertainment about people who have unruly children they can't control and living in poor houses. (White male, middle income, urban Scotland)

For stories to get reported there has to be an element of drama. If the story has drama and is good enough it will be picked up. Even in documentaries, the tendency is to report on people and their deficiencies rather than social causes. (Editor, regional Sunday newspaper)

McKendrick et al (2008) and Robinson et al (2009) pointed to the potential for third sector organisations to do much more to enable people on low incomes to take up opportunities to increase their representation in the media. However, Robinson et al (2009) found tensions in these opportunities, particularly in supporting people with experience of poverty to participate in media interviews etc. Third sector organisations had had their fingers burnt in such interviews. They felt that they or their clients had been badly treated, misrepresented or had experienced abusive responses from the public and at times even their own communities and families. There could also be tensions when organisations wanted to 'manage' what people might say, rather than empowering them by facilitating links between people with experience of poverty and the media. Sometimes these tensions arose within organisations, with different departments having different aims such as fund-raising, profile-raising, empowerment or advocacy for media engagement.

However, research by Ipsos Mori (2007) and by Delvaux and Rinne (2009) has shown that the most effective voice for engaging the public in anti-poverty debate is that of people with experience of poverty speaking directly. This tallies with research on communicating other complex subjects (e.g. 'Communicating asylum', Newman and Lewis, 2007). Hence it is important to take up these media opportunities.

Despite the risks, there are people with experience of poverty who want to put their views forward and share their story. Working with the media in different ways offers many opportunities for engaging the public in debate on poverty and inequality. One of the clearest opportunities is in journalists' interest in having 'a case study' to illustrate and give life to their story. Third sector organisations can play a major role in supporting people to prepare for this, through media training and

in negotiating whether to take up an opportunity for interview, including how to gain some control of the process.

Third sector organisations can also play a key role in enabling people to take up more general opportunities to be better represented in the media. This includes supporting people to take the opportunities offered by radio phone-ins, websites, television shows and newspapers to 'have your say'. Third sector organisations can help here by linking people to technology, for instance. These can be used to create alternative content and also to respond to media coverage when it is inaccurate or misleading.

Journalists don't slam the door in the face of the poor. They just don't go knocking. It's not just the journalistic process: poor people don't make their voices heard, so their stories don't get reporting. (Editor, regional Sunday newspaper)

You need a story, you need a person. (Political commentator, daily broadsheet)

In addition, people now have opportunities to create their own media content. They can bypass the traditional media editing channels and go straight to the public with text, images and sound on blogs and social networking sites. Robinson et al (2009) found examples of projects using new media and succeeding in building confidence and a sense of empowerment, but fewer examples of media content really finding an audience and engaging a broader public.

Community media also offer opportunities, with successful examples like 'Sunny Govan' broadcasting programmes made by and for the local community and maintaining a significant audience. A group broadcast for two weeks in August 2002 brought together people from across Govan. Initially intended to be a one-off celebration of the area, overwhelming support showed clear demand for the service to continue and broadcasts have continued on the web ever since (<http://www.sunnygovancommunitymedia.org/>).

Third sector efforts have often focused on getting into the news, maybe with an eye on reaching policy-makers. However, to reach a greater proportion of the public, other formats may be more appropriate. For instance, third sector groups could work with media to consider how soap operas might handle poverty and inequality.

Opportunities exist here for co-operation with the media, as programme makers are also looking for new programme formats and angles. There has been something of a recent trend for programmes that relate to poverty either directly or sometimes inadvertently by comparing extremes. These programmes often focus on contrasting the lives of people at either end of the wealth spectrum – particularly when they come into contact with each other, such as in programmes that swap aspects of lifestyle. Similarly, a number of documentaries and reality formats have immersed someone very rich in a poor community, for example the Secret Millionaire. These formats can be effective in reaching large audiences. But some in the JRF research projects felt that such an angle also sustains a view of ‘us and them’ in society, creating tension between people on high and low incomes rather than looking at society as a whole. In addition, they rarely go beyond the stage of contrasting the lifestyles of people at the different ends of the income spectrum and into a debate about the causes and consequences of inequality or options for reducing it. There are opportunities for new programme formats to go further in this area and also for third sector organisations to use new media to provide responses and stimulate debates on the back of such programmes.

The JRF research reports have suggested some steps as a way forward:

- build up trust between anti-poverty organisations and members of the media;
- develop means for stronger, more independent control over inaccurate reporting on poverty;
- build links between those with technical media skills and those with knowledge of stories relating to poverty and experience of it. Co-operation between these groups, acknowledging each other’s expertise, could create innovative and – most importantly – engaging media coverage of poverty that will attract new audiences. The research found many people in the media interested in covering these issues. Co-operation with supportive partners could prove fruitful.

## Engaging the public: efforts, successes and gaps

Researchers in the Public Interest in Poverty Issues programme found that people were generally uncomfortable with talking about poverty. Participants generally found it difficult to create an image of twenty-first century poverty in the UK. They struggled to find the words with which to discuss it, often falling back on images and language of the extremes of UK homelessness, Dickensian times or absolute poverty or poorer countries. Approaches that initially broke down UK poverty into more tangible aspects, along with stories, enabled people to engage with the subject more easily. Inequality also provided a way in, as a subject that many found more comfortable to discuss. However, many campaigners feel that to stop using the ‘language of poverty’ risks overlooking the reality of poverty in UK society and life for many.

Delvaux and Rinne’s (2009) contact with more than 100 initiatives engaged in anti-poverty work found very limited UK activity with the specific aim of changing public attitudes or building public support for anti-poverty measures. Instead, most third sector activity focuses on policy change. Where there is engagement with the public, it tends to aim to build awareness of poverty’s existence or galvanise existing supporters to make their support for policy change more visible – i.e. to demonstrate to policy-makers that support exists rather than focusing on building it further. This choice of focus is often due to resource constraints with policy change as the priority activity of the organisations, albeit that they all say that public support and attitude change is important and necessary. The perception in the third sector is that funding for building public support is not available for the sustained programmes that would be needed to make real change.

The private sector does not see its job as building public support, and many in government admit that the government does little itself directly to build public support for anti-poverty measures. Some work is underway in local government and parts of the public sector to build awareness of poverty among staff and management. This tends to aim to get the issue further up the organisation’s agenda or be a means of discussing the organisation’s relevance to poverty eradication. This is important work, particularly when staff are in decision-making roles or in the front line delivering services to people on low incomes. However, these initiatives are not designed to go further towards building public support outside, though this may happen indirectly in some cases.

Third sector initiatives tend to focus on highlighting the existence and reality of UK poverty, often through individual stories. However, this is not taken further to link these individual stories to a wider explanation of the causes and possible solutions to UK poverty. In general, neither third sector nor public sector communication address some of the public's legitimate fears – such as that solutions to poverty will result in increased taxes, fears about the risks of benefit fraud, or belief that those who benefit from state support will not make a reciprocal contribution to society.

The most successful measures for engaging the public are those where people can meet each other and engage in genuine dialogue on poverty and society. Schemes such as Business in the Community's programme for business leaders, 'Seeing is Believing', and the End Child Poverty campaign 'Dare to Care', which both built links between people on higher and lower incomes and provided practical volunteering opportunities, have been successful. A major challenge is to find ways to scale up these opportunities for interaction, particularly as we live increasingly segregated lives. Other successful approaches are to work with a community defined by a common interest, such as football in the case of the Fair Pay League, or a community linked by faith. For instance, Islamic Aid has used its annual brochure, which usually only covers poverty issues internationally, to also look at poverty in the UK. This resulted in increased enquiries and support for its work.

People with experience of poverty emphasise the need for the reality of poverty to be more widely understood and presented more directly in political debate. They stress the problems associated with living in areas stigmatised by categorisation as being deprived or in need and further exacerbated by media coverage. Measures such as including discussion about poverty in schools, if handled sensitively, could build greater understanding of the dynamics of society.

Many organisations collect at least anecdotal data on whether their efforts are having some effect. However, although organisations often have very clear policy objectives, their plans and activities for public engagement tend to have more vague or unrealistic aims in terms of impact on public opinion. A theory of change and the role of public opinion are often absent. Public engagement activities are often accompanied by monitoring that stops at the point of counting outputs (e.g. number of people trained, amount of media coverage) rather than evaluation that considers impact more deeply in building public support. Delvaux and

Rinne (2009) found a need for more skills in setting up and running monitoring and evaluation systems, and more information on some of the tools available for this.

## Using alternative frameworks to broaden involvement

One area with potential for growth is in broadening the range of groups and organisations involved in the anti-poverty debate. Donald and Mottershaw (2009) found that experience in other parts of the world (rich and poor countries) suggested that human rights frameworks provide an umbrella under which a diverse range of groups can come together. Human rights frameworks also offer an effective way to shift the basis of debate from need and welfare to entitlement. Until now, co-operation between human rights and anti-poverty groups in the UK has been limited, but there is potential and interest in working together on practical initiatives.

Donald and Mottershaw (2009) also suggested that human rights frameworks and tools could provide practical ways to monitor the expected public sector spending cuts, and advocacy to ensure that they do not fall hardest on those in poverty. Co-operation in producing shadow UN monitoring systems reports on UK adherence to human rights commitments, and using other accountability tools, may also provide concrete means for a broader group to become involved in anti-poverty action.

However, Donald and Mottershaw (2009) also observed that many UK anti-poverty actors see the language of human rights as complicating efforts to influence some audiences, who may view it as legalistic, overly adversarial or irrelevant. They highlighted widespread lack of awareness and understanding of human rights – and their links to poverty – among communities affected by poverty, the public, charities and advice groups, and those who design and implement public policy. The research implies that human rights are important to draw on in policy development, and may also be useful in bringing together a range of groups to co-operate. However, some campaigners feel that the language of human rights has less resonance in UK public-facing communication at this stage. Instead, broader principles that inform human rights too – such as equality and fairness, and highlighting some of the wider benefits to society of addressing poverty and inequality – will have more traction.

## Building public support: implications for practitioners

The JRF Public Interest in Poverty Issues programme identified that an effective way to build public engagement and support for anti-poverty measures is through a communication strategy that presents:

- individual life stories as a way to bring people into a dialogue;
- broader narratives to link individual stories to explanations of why poverty exists and persists and is beyond individuals' ability to end;
- solutions to eradicate poverty, to highlight that change is possible.

Building public interest is not about 'marketing poverty' and presenting it in a way to appeal. It is about understanding people's current attitudes in order to find ways to engage them in debates about causes of and solutions to poverty and inequality.

It may also be about changing the terms of the debate, using frameworks and narratives that move the debate beyond individuals and their needs to broader explanations of causes and solutions to poverty. The role of the state, wider society and private sector as well as the individual would be highlighted in such framing of the debate. These explanations bring in economic, social and political elements. Such linked narratives and debate are generally missing from current public debate on poverty and inequality

Some of the early 21st century impetus for building a new movement supporting action on UK poverty was stimulated by the Make Poverty History campaign. This international campaign was significant, but the work on the JRF programme has highlighted the need and potential for a long-term, multi-faceted approach to build public support. No single 'celebrity campaign' is going to change public attitudes and build and sustain public support, even though this may be one part of a broader programme of activity. Instead, a range of initiatives is needed, including:

- debate that goes beyond building awareness of poverty. This needs the presentation of narratives exploring the causes of poverty and inequality, possible policy solutions, and being explicit about what aspects of inequality policy will address;

- care in public sector and government communication to avoid implicit reinforcing of negative stereotypes e.g. benefit fraud campaigns can reinforce misperceptions of the scale of benefit fraud whereas benefit entitlement campaigns can help shift stigma some associate with receiving benefit;
- tailored initiatives to explain UK poverty, its relevance to organisations and individuals' roles, and what they can do e.g. Business in the Community's initiative with the private sector, and poverty awareness training in the public sector with front-line workers and management;
- co-operation between third sector organisations and the media to develop innovative formats in mainstream and new media to address gaps in current coverage and build audiences for debate on poverty and inequality-related issues. Cooperation will bring together the key skills and experiences of media, marketing and other professionals with those of the third sector and people with experience of poverty. Suggestions such as regional media hubs and co-operation by organisations to develop new media content outlets should be considered;
- new media programme formats exploring poverty in UK society and giving voice to people with experience of poverty, along with platforms for wide-ranging, inclusive debate about its causes and solutions;
- public communication building public awareness of poverty and inequality in the UK, engaging with people's real concerns about its causes and debate about solutions to poverty. The responsibility to address these concerns and build a debate lies in all areas – government, public and private sectors, media and civil society;
- using the current financial crisis and unease with aspects of British society to build an inclusive debate on poverty and inequality. This is an opportunity to uncover underlying support for measures to address poverty and inequality in the UK through targeted support, and to tap into public beliefs that a more equal society will be better for everyone.

## References

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