

Effective participation in anti-poverty and regeneration work and research

There is increasing interest in the participation of people with direct experience in anti-poverty and regeneration policy and practice. This project, by Peter Beresford and Martin Hoban, draws together the lessons from seven key initiatives which have sought to involve people with direct experience of poverty. It identifies existing obstacles and a series of helpful elements for improving practice. The study found:

- Powerlessness is central to people's experience of poverty and disadvantage. Conventional bureaucratic and managerial 'top-down' approaches to participation have very limited success.
- Existing experience identifies barriers to people's participation at four levels: personal; political and institutional; economic and cultural; and technical. All need to be addressed for participation to work.
- People are much more likely to get involved in work if they have a strong sense that something tangible and worthwhile will come out of it.
- Supporting independent organisations which people themselves develop and control, at local level and beyond, is a vital building block for effective participation.
- Capacity building to develop people's confidence, self-esteem and understanding supports their empowerment and participation. It is not the same as skill development to equip people to work in the way that agencies traditionally work.
- Such capacity building is particularly helpful in encouraging diverse involvement and ensuring the participation of black and minority ethnic groups.



Background

There are now increasing requirements to involve people as patients, 'service users' and members of the public, in local services and 'communities'. This interest has extended to people with direct experience of poverty living in disadvantaged areas. Regeneration policy now seeks to involve such groups. This is seen as one way of countering the 'social exclusion' which they are seen to experience. However, particular difficulties are identified in the way of involving people with experience of poverty. Many people are reluctant to identify themselves as 'poor'. They may be overloaded with other responsibilities and difficulties. Such poverty may only be temporary.

Historically, anti-poverty work has also tended to be led by people who seek to improve the lives of others but who do not have significant experience of poverty themselves. This is still a strong tradition and can be difficult to challenge. Regeneration policies are also having to recognise that disadvantage is no longer a straightforward matter of disadvantaged localities and that areas are now also likely to have complex, mixed and changing populations and identities.

There is now considerable experience in anti-poverty initiatives and from related fields, like disability and social care, to help support participation in the contexts of anti-poverty and regeneration policy and practice. However, this experience has not been synthesised and has often not been readily available. The aim of this project was to identify key themes and pull together practical ways of enabling involvement in this field on a more systematic basis.

To do this, it looked at the lessons to be learned from a series of participatory initiatives relating to poverty and place. Their focus included anti-poverty policy and practice, welfare reform and area-based policies. The project examined their different origins and aims, the kind of involvement available and what support and opportunities they offered people to participate. The sources of the initiatives ranged from an independent 'user-controlled' project, an international development agency and a large coalition of large voluntary organisations; 'ownership' of initiatives varied accordingly. People with experience of poverty were involved in different ways and at different levels and stages. Finding things out in order to make change was a common goal. The initiatives highlight the importance of developing research approaches in which people with experience of poverty can participate effectively.

A helpful approach

A common theme to emerge from all of these activities was the importance of people working together and developing their own discussions. Linked to this was the value of creating a relaxed and enjoyable experience

for participation. Some initiatives provided opportunities for learning and skill development. These were more concerned with 'learning by doing' rather than a formal process of 'training'. They were based on personal reflection, sharing personal and group experiences and concerns, and group working and discussion. As one study reported:

People living in poverty have been taught to believe their opinions don't count, they may need to go through a long process before feeling confident in articulating their views.

Common barriers

A key message to emerge was that people are only likely to participate when they believe that there may be a positive experience and outcome for them around the issues they are most concerned with. Additional obstacles are created by people's day-to-day struggle for survival, the effort much involvement takes – "it felt like swimming against the tide," as one person said – and many people's long-term sense of powerlessness.

The broader structural context of participation imposes further constraints. Is it really possible to challenge large-scale economic change and decline or a legacy of 'them and us'? More immediately, however, much anti-poverty and regeneration activity is complex, confusing, strongly 'top-down' and shaped by political and professional agendas. Participation has often been an add-on, offered without adequate time, preparation or infrastructural support. While agencies often want one 'community perspective' many different perspectives may exist, some more acceptable than others, some from groups facing particular marginalisation, for example, young people and black and minority ethnic residents. As research in Newcastle upon Tyne on the New Deal for Communities Programme reported:

Simply sharing an artificial space is not enough to foster a sense of sharedness-of-community amongst those residents living within its borders.

Key lessons

The participatory initiatives studied highlight both problems arising from traditional ways of doing things and approaches which seem to work. It was widely felt that participation was more often used as a tool to achieve outcomes which had largely been decided already. As a result people's experience was often neither enjoyable nor empowering. Thus participation can actually add to poor people's sense of powerlessness, which one project concluded was 'at the root of poverty' and disadvantage.

The project highlights a number of routes out of such inequalities of power.

Start with people's own perceptions and experiences

Listen to (local) poor people and take account of what they identify as issues of direct concern to them in their own lives and localities. Their views and analyses are the starting-point.

The importance of independent grassroots organisations

These are seen as one of the most valuable and under-resourced vehicles for change. Ruth Lister's idea of 'self-actualisation' emphasises participation as both a personal and collective process that enables poor and excluded people to organise collectively and engage with powerholders to improve their own lives and environments. A range of support will be needed for this to happen, including human resources, funding, time and commitment.

Principles for working together

Existing working practices often get in the way of effective involvement and partnerships with poor people. The full report suggests a number of principles for helping this process develop. These highlight clarity, negotiation and shared ownership.

What's wanted from workers

Studies stress the need for changed, more equal relationships between people and workers. Residents want workers who are 'enablers' rather than 'doers', who will help and support, rather than take over. A number of studies highlight the need for a *team of workers* with relevant personal experience and qualities, as well as technical skills.

Resourcing participation

Most projects place an emphasis on acknowledging that meaningful participation takes time and patience and requires additional support in terms of funding, skill and time. This includes paying participants and addressing the barriers to involvement posed by current benefits policy and practice.

Including all voices and perspectives

As one project stated: *"If the community is seen as homogeneous then only the most powerful voice will tend to be heard"*. Some projects took specific steps to address diversity in participation. Participatory and consensual decision-making processes that are very different to traditional mechanisms help here. At least three strands to including black and minority ethnic communities are highlighted: first, reaching out to include them; second, resourcing specific black and minority ethnic self-organisations; and third, supporting all community, service user and citizens' organisations to be inclusive through race equality training and additional resources. The exclusion of disabled people is seen as closely related to discriminatory attitudes and lack of awareness and is most effectively challenged by commitment to broadly defined access policies and practices.

Involve people with direct experience in finding things out

The projects expressed a clear call for people with experience of poverty to have more impact and influence on policy and practice. One way of doing this was enabling them to have more influence in research. As experts in their own experience, they could help shape the focus and process of research to improve policy and practice in regeneration and anti-poverty work.

Making change

As one study stated, *"Reports don't change policies ... it's people who will bring about change"*. Often opportunities for follow up have been limited through a lack of funding and capacity. Also the knowledge and experience gained from initiatives are lost because they are not easily available. Policies for inclusive and accessible dissemination are key here: but so is providing resources and support for follow-up activity. Projects should not be conceived as one-offs.

Supporting success

Taken together, existing initiatives point to a series of components which help ensure good practice for involving people with direct experience in anti-poverty and regeneration policy and practice. These include:

- Recognising the importance of capacity building;
- Reaching out to people rather than expecting them to respond;
- Starting where people are, valuing their perspectives rather than assuming familiarity with conventional ways of doing things;
- Establishing accessible and 'user friendly' structures and processes for participation;
- Ensuring access in its broadest sense, including physical, environmental and cultural access;
- Enabling involvement on both an individual and collective basis;
- Helping to develop a sense of ownership by involving people in the shaping of participatory schemes;
- Being clear and open about power relationships in participation;
- Linking participation with making change in line with what people want and prioritise;
- Ensuring that participatory schemes are not narrowly tied to the existing agenda of the initiating organisation or agency;
- Recognising that current benefits policy and practice currently inhibit people's participation, accepting a 'duty of care' and recognising the need for change;
- Supporting and maintaining independent organisations run by people with knowledge drawn from experience as a basis for their capacity building and effective involvement;
- Supporting specific black and minority ethnic participatory initiatives and organisations;

- Building monitoring, evaluation and follow-up routinely into participatory schemes so that their lessons can equally routinely be learned and acted on;
- Supporting opportunities for negotiation, rather than assuming agreement. People with direct experience are far from a homogeneous group. They may have competing goals and concerns. Participatory schemes can and should enable these to be negotiated;
- Improving access to the growing body of experience about participation and poverty by collating existing knowledge and making it more readily available to local people, agencies and researchers wishing to draw on it.

About the project

The aim of the project was to identify from existing experience what factors may help and what factors may hinder people's effective involvement in participatory schemes and initiatives relating to poverty/disadvantage and place/regeneration. The study drew on and explored a range of different projects and initiatives which have developed different degrees and forms of involvement and which have been concerned to include 'lived experience' and 'experiential knowledge' in both their process and outcomes. Seven different participatory initiatives were included in the study. They were based in England, Wales, Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic. The project was supported by an advisory group of people bringing together experience of poverty, disadvantage, participation, regeneration and education (discussions were held using electronic means).

How to get further information

The full report, **Participation in anti-poverty and regeneration work and research: Overcoming barriers and creating opportunities** by Peter Beresford and Martin Hoban, is available here. Further information on the project is available from Peter Beresford at peter.Beresford@brunel.ac.uk.

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