

# Eradicating child poverty: the role of key policy areas

## The effects of discrimination on families in the fight to end child poverty

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November 2008

**This report focuses on the discrimination experienced by families living in poverty in the UK ('povertyism'), examining the barriers preventing them from enjoying equal access to fundamental economic and social rights.**

Current thinking, in the national and international poverty debate, is that the question of rights, and their absence, is linked to poverty. Povertyism perpetuates a lack of knowledge and understanding about the lives of people experiencing poverty. The resulting policy approach leads to a denial of their basic human rights.

The report:

- defines and describes the concept of povertyism;
- explains povertyism as a barrier to people moving out of poverty, looking at use of language, the loss of rights, the role of services in perpetuating povertyism and barriers to accessing services
- looks at possible ways of removing povertyism as a barrier, for example by changing attitudes among service providers and policy makers, and ensuring equal access to services.

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This report focuses on the discrimination experienced by people living in poverty in the UK, 'povertyism', as a result of barriers preventing them from enjoying equal access to fundamental economic and social rights. Povertyism can be defined as the discrimination people experience on the basis of living in poverty.

The report looks at povertyism as a barrier to people moving out of poverty and finds that:

- *The use of language* with negative connotations to refer to people living in poverty can lead them to grater alienation from society. It also reinforces stereotypes held by the public at large making it more difficult for anti-poverty organisations, and the government, to gain their support for anti-poverty policies and campaigns.
- *The emphasis on responsibilities before rights* has led to an erosion of basic rights to social protection, particularly increased conditionality on welfare entitlements. It finds that equal weight is not given to protecting social and economic rights, such as those concerning employment. It finds that the effect of such an approach can thwart the desired ambition to create a partnership between parents and the state.
- *Families living in poverty often experience enormous difficulties in accessing their rights to services.* They also face povertyism in the form of judgements from other people based on stereotypes of people living in poverty. They report that insufficient account is taken of their material circumstances, as well as a lack of understanding of how poverty affects their confidence to take up services potentially of benefit to them. Many disadvantaged families live with the fear of their children being taken into care due to the intervention of local authority social services and families living in poverty are over-represented as users of children and

families' services, which makes them liable to lose children into care. It is therefore apparent that while such discrimination in treatment by service-providers prevails, it will remain difficult to engage with families experiencing the greatest poverty.

The report goes on to look at possible ways forward that would remove povertyism as a barrier to successful engagement with families facing poverty:

- There is a need for recognition that when fears, either to assert access to rights or to services, are so deep rooted, it will take time as well as considerable effort and resources for families to engage in anti-poverty policies.
- *Service-providers and policy-makers* can be made more aware of povertyism and its effects by involving people with experience of poverty in the front-line training of relevant practitioners.
- *Priority must be given to ensuring equal access to services.* The methodology used by service-providers and policy-makers in reaching the most disadvantaged needs re-examination to remove the discrimination in terms of access to services experienced by those most vulnerable to poverty. A solution is to develop outreach tools that can successfully reach the most disadvantaged families.

# Introduction

*'Poverty can be seen as the deprivation of a person's effective freedom to live the way he or she has reason to want to live.'* (Sen, 2006)

*A lack of basic security is the absence of one or more factors that enable individuals and families to assume professional, family and social responsibilities and to enjoy fundamental rights. Such a situation may become more extended and lead to more serious and permanent consequences. Extreme poverty results when the lack of basic security simultaneously affects several aspects of people's lives, when it is prolonged and when it severely compromises people's chances of regaining their rights and of reassuming their responsibility in the foreseeable future.* (Despouy, 1996)

*One of the most dreadful aspects of living in poverty is that everyone has an opinion about how you should live, regardless of the resources you have, and you are far more likely to come to the attention of the authorities in one form or another. Needing to ask for help is painful enough, but to be treated with disdain and distrust by those to whom you have to turn is a raw and humiliating experience.* (Roberts, 2006, p. 30)

This report focuses on the discrimination experienced by people living in poverty in the UK, 'povertyism', as a result of barriers preventing them from enjoying equal access to fundamental economic and social rights.

The quotes above exemplify current thinking, in the national and international poverty debate, that the question of rights, and absence thereof, is inextricably linked to poverty. This is born out by major human rights organisations, such as Amnesty International, turning their attention to poverty as a driver of discrimination (Amnesty International, 2007).

It is also supported by people living in poverty in the UK's own definition of poverty. As part of a project to involve parents with experience

of poverty in the training of social workers, participants were asked to define poverty (ATD Fourth World, 2005):

- Being on the margins
- Lack of power over your own life and a lack of choices
- Having no voice; not being heard
- Having no right to refuse services that you feel are inappropriate
- Having low self-esteem
- Lack of status
- Feeling shame and stigma
- Having a wealth of expertise in survival, courage and humility, but this not being recognised
- Being blamed and judged by others for the situation you are in

ATD Fourth World<sup>1</sup> has long advocated the link between poverty and human rights. The organisation, founded by Joseph Wresinski, brought up in a family environment of poverty, was at the origins of commemorating the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty, the first staging of which in Paris in 1987 launched the day's central message: 'Wherever men and women are condemned to live in extreme poverty, human rights are violated. To come together to ensure that these rights be respected is our solemn duty'.

The link between human rights and poverty is well reflected in international frameworks, from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, through to the Revised European Social Charter in 1996. These articles afford citizens the right to a decent standard of living and a minimum level of social protection. However, the UK government

has more often than not treated the adoption of measures linked to supra-national structures such as the European Union (EU) or the UN as a loss of the UK's right to govern (Killeen, 2008).

When people experience discrimination on the basis of living in poverty this can be defined as 'povertyism'. Povertyism perpetuates a lack of knowledge and understanding about the lives of people experiencing poverty (ATD Fourth World, 2005). Such attitudes are sometimes based on the view that people living in poverty are inferior or of lesser value (Killeen, 2008). The consequence of povertyism, for those who experience it, is that such attitudes become a driver of a particular policy approach that results in denial of their basic human rights.

# 1 Povertyism as a barrier to people moving out of poverty

## Use of language by policy makers and its impact

As part of its work in preparing this report, ATD Fourth World brought together a group of parents living in poverty in London. The group was diverse in terms of age, ethnicity, gender, and included both single and couple households. It met over several days and topics discussed included the impact of language and the discourse employed by policy-makers when talking about poverty.

Participants from the group were particularly shocked by a minister referring to the environment of a social housing estate as a “No one works around here culture”. Not only did the group not identify with this description, they went as far as to say that such language, “degrades and humiliates people living in poverty and distracts society from what’s really happening”.

This is backed up by participatory research carried out by ATD Fourth World that found that in order to help build trust with people living in poverty, policy-makers should use language that empowers rather than stigmatises (ATD Fourth World, 2008).

Another example raised by parents of government action concerned the campaign to target benefit fraud. Participants felt this deliberately reiterated a stereotype of people claiming benefits as criminals, making it more difficult to galvanise public support in anti-poverty campaigning. Some participants raised the question of why equal attention was not given over to tax evaders, which has far greater costs to the taxpayer, estimates putting the amount lost in revenue at over £100 billion compared to under £1 billion in benefit fraud. While the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) allocated £7.3 million to its campaign to raise awareness of ‘benefit thieves’ in 2006, £1.5 million was spent on a campaign to threaten and deter potential tax thieves (Taylor, 2007).

This raises the question of why successive governments have opted for a public discourse that alienates those experiencing poverty and perpetuates scepticism among the general public of the very existence of poverty. In actual fact, this low level of public awareness is acknowledged by the UK government as a barrier to tackling child poverty (HM Treasury, 2008). The consequence of this is to make it more difficult for anti-poverty organisations, and government, to gain public support for anti-poverty policies and campaigns.

## Erosion of rights

Since it came into power, New Labour has coupled anti-poverty policy with a ‘rights and responsibilities’ agenda. Examples in policy range from welfare reform to the anti-social behaviour agenda. People experiencing poverty are increasingly expected to meet ever more demanding responsibilities in order to meet the criteria for claiming entitlements, while equal emphasis is not given to protecting their rights.

A parents’ group brought together by ATD Fourth World considered the impact of conditionality on entitlements to social protection. Points to emerge included:

*‘If you force yourself [to meet requirements to claim benefits] you increase your stress, you can fall apart, you’re not ready.’*

*‘If you’re stressed, depressed, you can’t meet the conditions and they cut benefits – it becomes a vicious circle, setting people up to fail.’*

*‘If children are too young, it can be too much to take on – childcare, kids to school. You need to consider people’s capabilities.’*

*'When you read it ["contract"<sup>2</sup> with families to move out of poverty] you feel pushed aside to the margins. They seem to be saying: "Let's sort these people out, make an example of them".'*

*'[Talking about the "contract"] It feels like having an ASBO [Anti-Social Behaviour Order] or behavioural order. If it goes wrong then we get punished – if they go wrong who'll punish them?'*

*'They're pitting the middle class against the poor by saying negative things about the poor.'*

Although the intention of policy-makers is to encourage people experiencing poverty to take up opportunities and initiatives aiming to improve people's lives, the impact of such a hard-line approach from government can be to further isolate its intended beneficiaries.

ATD Fourth World's poverty peer research project found that people did not feel they were afforded equal access to employment rights in particular, leading to recommendations being made to strengthen enforcement of employment laws intended to prevent employers and agencies avoiding the payment of overtime, sick and holiday pay. The report also recommended prosecuting employers who employ 'off the books' to a degree that it acts as a deterrent. Examples highlighted from those interviewed for the research included (ATD Fourth World, 2008):

*'My health is not very good, I had an operation for my leg. If I go to hospital, I have one day off for hospital but they take the money, I don't get paid.'*

*'I can count out 200 agencies which give jobs cash-in-hand to people, but to people who do not speak English because they won't mix up their business.'*

*'I work in a primary school as a kitchen assistant, it's a very hard job.... Every day I work four hours, but am only paid for three-and-a-half hours.'*

The welfare reform green paper, published in July 2008, reinforces this approach by making entitlement to Jobseeker's Allowance for some claimants conditional on carrying out unpaid 'relevant' full-time work (DWP, 2008). Similar examples can be taken from other policy areas, such as the recent announcement to cut benefits of substance misusers who do not undertake treatment. Ministers have also questioned whether to condition access to such basic rights as social housing by placing responsibilities on beneficiaries to undertake work-related training (Flint, 2008).

Such policy exacerbates povertyism by conditioning people living in poverty's access to fundamental rights. Participants in the parents' group felt treated differently, because they were in receipt of benefits. For example, one participant, on the subject of moving lone parents into work, stated:

*'I wanted to be with my kids; is that a crime?'*

The undesired effect of such policies can be further disengagement from the desired ambition of creating a partnership between parents and the state. Possible consequences include discouraging people from claiming their entitlements if they feel conditions are too stringent, which will add to the stress poverty already engendered in people's lives. As a respondent to ATD Fourth World's peer research project stated:

*'... I'm so ill, my head is getting worse and my body is getting worse, and if I sit down and think about money it's the same problems, the same routine, the same every day, nothing changes....' (quoted in ATD Fourth World, 2008)*

Participants in the parents' group mentioned several times how the increased emphasis on responsibilities versus rights pushed people into illegality, either by making a false claim or taking cash-in-hand jobs to supplement income for short periods or to gain work experience. One participant expressed this as,

*'People are forced to scheme to keep their heads above water.'*

Participants in the group did not condone this approach; however, they did emphasise that such behaviour was adopted as a means of survival rather than to enrich oneself. This is backed up by research that showed that people in some deprived areas work informally, out of 'need not greed', in response to poverty: they feared going without basics such as food and heating or facing mounting debt. The researchers concluded that punitive measures to tackle this activity could have limited success where poverty drives the decision to work informally (Katungi, *et al.*, 2006).

This evidence from people living in poverty illustrates how povertyism can lead to people feeling marginalised by policy and decision-makers due to feelings of being treated differently because they live in poverty. Language used and consequences of making rights more difficult to access must be considered if there is a wish to engage people living in poverty in the commitment to end child poverty.

## Role of services in perpetuating povertyism

Families living in poverty often experience enormous difficulties in accessing their rights to services. They also face povertyism in the form of judgements from other people based on stereotypes of people living in poverty. Prejudices and pre-conceived ideas mean people experiencing poverty are at a disadvantage – an image of the 'poor person' is created without any personal knowledge of them: "If you are on benefits you should have enough to get by; if you can't, you must waste your money on alcohol and cigarettes or spend it irresponsibly". Stereotypes can lead to suggestions that if you live in poverty you are likely to neglect your family.

Families report that insufficient account is taken of their material circumstances, as well as a lack of understanding of how poverty affects their confidence to take up services potentially of benefit to them. Work by ATD Fourth World (2006) in piloting a tool to reach the most disadvantaged families accounted for the lack of take-up of services as being due to service users:

- finding the attitudes of the professional staff in the services off-putting and patronising
- thinking that services were not relevant to their needs
- being ashamed of being in need or fearful of being judged as unable to cope
- being worried about possible interference in their lives, about their control being undermined or about their privacy being invaded
- being fully preoccupied and overwhelmed by their difficulties and not having the freedom of mind to look for sources of support.

Many disadvantaged families live with the fear of their children being taken into care due to the intervention of local authority social services. This is backed up by recent research by Canvin, *et al.* (2007), which showed that, for families in poverty, encounters with public services were perceived to be associated with the risk of losing resources, being misunderstood or harshly judged or, ultimately, losing their children.

Within the ATD Fourth World parents' group to prepare this report, one participant drew comparisons of how a parent living in poverty would have been treated by the police and children's social services if the Madeleine McCann situation had happened to their family:

*'If it had happened to us, they would have taken all our kids into care just like that.'*

It is accepted that families living in poverty are over-represented as users of children and families' services, which makes them liable to lose children into care. Poverty remains the key indicator associated with children becoming looked after by local authorities. Bebbington and Miles (1989) graphically illustrated the links between poverty and children coming into the care system by demonstrating that children living in poverty are 700 times more likely to become 'looked after'. This is especially true of children of mixed heritage, from lone-parent families and the children of parents who themselves were raised in care. Ivaldi's study



(2000) on adoption found that 89% of birth mothers whose child was subsequently adopted were not working when a decision was made that it was in their child's best interest to be adopted. Only 3% were employed in either professional managerial or skilled occupations.

Families often feel let down by the services that are meant to support them, with offers of support not delivered on or initial help being retracted due to a lack of resources. Yet when families living in poverty fail to meet criteria and time scales laid down by service-providers, they are often criticised:

*'If they don't meet their commitments they just say it is a lack of resources and that's it. If we can't meet the deadlines as a result of getting no help they say it's our fault and we lose the child. How can that be fair?'*  
(quoted in ATD Fourth World, 2004)

This experience makes families experiencing poverty reluctant to use any form of services. As one mother in the parents' group put it,

*'When you're living in poverty, you don't answer the knock at the door. It's never good news: it's either the debt collector, the housing officer, the police or the social worker.'*

It is therefore apparent that while such discrimination in treatment by service-providers prevails, it will remain difficult to engage with families experiencing poverty.

## 2 Removing povertyism as a barrier

### Changing attitudes among service-providers and policy-makers

There are steps that can be taken to break down the barriers created by povertyism that prevents those that experience it from participating fully in society. However, it should be recognised that when fears, either to assert access to rights or to services, are so deep rooted, this will take time as well as genuine effort and resources.

One way to achieve this is to involve people with experience of poverty in the front-line training of relevant practitioners. As part of its work in building a training programme to increase the awareness of poverty among social workers, the following outcomes were drawn up (ATD Fourth World, 2005):

- *Self-awareness and poverty-awareness:* have an understanding of service users' definitions of poverty; develop an awareness of 'povertyism'; of what families need in order to cope and an understanding of what is 'good enough' in a family's circumstances; do not aim for something impossible.
- *Power and powerlessness:* have an understanding of the fear and stress (and the potential effects of this on behaviour) that come with powerlessness in the face of local government institutions, and the fear that children could be removed; gain more knowledge about the difficulties posed by inequality; develop an awareness of societal double standards where 'multiple carers' are not acceptable but 'au pairs' are valued.
- *Practical skills:* provide training around recording – notes and report writing – in a way that does not oppress families and individuals; have an understanding of the importance of service user ownership of assessments; learn to

distinguish risks that parents create from needs that are created by a family's poverty; have an understanding of the need for statutory services to provide the financial wherewithal for people to make changes, for example, a suggestion of a special diet for a child may be difficult on a family's current income.

- *A rights-based perspective:* develop an understanding of the importance of independent advocacy for a family; have an ability to see the resilience of families and the positive qualities, skills and strengths that they show; practice not judging by appearances; have a deepened awareness of adults' rights as parents as well as children's rights; develop an understanding of social workers' own rights to good supervision and support.

### Case study: Example of what works

ATD Fourth World recently worked with Gary and Vicky, who grew up and live in long-term poverty. After the birth of their new baby, the local authority social services department raised concerns about their parenting skills and capacity to provide for the baby's well-being. The couple was sent to live for three months in an assessment centre. ATD Fourth World's family support worker collaborated closely with assessment centre staff and social workers to help them understand the impact of long-term poverty on family life. At the same time, she helped Gary and Vicky to identify and express their aspirations and the kind of assistance they needed. After three months, the family was allowed to continue the assessment in their own home. With ongoing backing from ATD Fourth World – and despite many

difficulties due to their circumstances – their confidence continued to grow, as did their parenting skills. Today, Gary, Vicky and their son rejoice at their life as a family.

## Ensuring equal access to services

There is also a need to re-examine the methodology used by service-providers and policy-makers in reaching the most disadvantaged and thus removing discrimination in terms of access to services experienced by those most vulnerable to poverty.

This is particularly relevant given the stated aims of the Social Exclusion Task Force to target intervention on the ‘most excluded 2% of families who have not been lifted by the rising tide of living standards and increased opportunity, and who remain in poverty with complex needs, multiple problems and low aspiration’ (Cabinet Office, 2007).

Over the course of 18 months, ATD Fourth World worked with a Sure Start local programme to pilot a project in order to develop an outreach tool to reach the most disadvantaged families. The following lessons emerged, which are transferable to all kinds of service provision (ATD Fourth World, 2006):

- To be effective, outreach tools need to combine a proactive approach with a willingness to adapt to how people feel from week to week. Families should not be expected to fit in with a model the service-provider has decided on in advance.
- To be effective, outreach tools and services should review their routine administrative processes, particularly those elements that make the services threatening for vulnerable families. Think twice: do people really need to give their name and address when they first use a service or to sign in when they arrive?
- Families should not have to justify their need for services. To be effective, outreach tools and services should not start by asking families about their problems. People should be free to

share what they want of their lives, when they feel ready.

- To be effective, outreach tools, services and – above all – their funders must be prepared to make a long-term commitment. They must recognise and accept that they may not be able to show concrete evidence of success within a few months.
- To be effective, outreach tools must give priority to those who most affected by poverty and social exclusion rather than aiming for the highest numbers.
- To be effective, outreach tools and services need to address what a family wants – being led by them – not just provide what providers think a family needs. Services must be prepared to be shaped by what families ask for.
- To be effective, outreach tools must find the means to involve the whole community.

# 3 Conclusion

When the parents' group was asked for possible solutions to the issue of povertyism, solutions ranged from creating a Poverty Discrimination Act (along the lines of the Disability Discrimination Act) through to "Better advice for parents to know what they're entitled to receive".

ATD Fourth World's experience of working alongside families living in long-term poverty has shown that while families have unequal access to basic rights, they will be unable to benefit from anti-poverty measures designed to meet their needs.

Policy-makers and service-providers need a better understanding of the effects of poverty on people's everyday life and appreciate that spaces need to be created to learn from their experience. As a research participant put it:

*'I have worked through my problems: counselling, Sure Start, Home-Start ... talking helps – not judging. We have our own solutions.'* (quoted in ATD Fourth World, 2008)

The next step will be for government actors and agents to acknowledge povertyism as a concept and address its consequences as outlined in this report. It is hoped that the new Equalities and Human Rights Commission can go towards raising awareness of povertyism by gathering evidence of its effects and challenging government to tackle its discriminatory outcomes.

Other glimmers of hope exist within international frameworks such as the adoption by the UN Human Rights Council of an Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which the UK has ratified. This will provide the opportunity for individuals seeking a remedy for violations of economic, social and cultural rights to have their complaints adjudicated by the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural rights.

What does appear to be clear from the evidence presented in this report is that if parents remain marginalised through povertyism, they will be unable to engage in the fight to end child poverty.

Their participation in this process is essential if the child poverty goal is to be reached. As a grassroots member of ATD Fourth World put it:

*'People who live in poverty know the solutions to their problems better than anyone else. Asking their opinions and giving them a voice is essential if we are to come to any true understanding of poverty and what can be done to eradicate it.'* (quoted in ATD Fourth World, 2005)

# Notes

- 1 ATD Fourth World works alongside people living in long-term poverty to support them in their refusal to accept poverty as a fact of life and to find the solutions to eradicate it together. Members of the International Movement ATD Fourth World, a non-governmental organisation (NGO) with general consultative status with the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) of the United Nations (UN), ATD Fourth World have been forming partnerships with very poor families in order to combat poverty in the UK for over 40 years. More information on the UK work can be found at [www.atd-uk.org](http://www.atd-uk.org)
- 2 This refers to the *contract out of poverty*, as set out in a report published by HM Treasury (2008).

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The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has supported this project as part of its programme of research and innovative development projects, which it hopes will be of value to policy makers, practitioners and service users. The facts presented and views expressed in this report are, however, those of the author[s] and not necessarily those of the Foundation.

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A CIP catalogue record for this report is available from the British Library.

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ISBN 9781859356708 (pdf)



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# About the author

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Matt joined ATD Fourth World, initially as an intern, in 1994. Since then, he has worked on projects ranging from street education workshops for children in Guatemalan shanty towns, through to supporting gypsy families to access housing rights in Madrid. Until July this year, he was the UK National Coordinator of ATD Fourth World, a responsibility he held for seven years. He recently joined the International Movement ATD Fourth World's International Relations team and is based in London, UK. He is married with three children.