

Participatory approaches to research on poverty

What real voice do people with direct experience of poverty have in research and inquiry into poverty? This study, by Fran Bennett with Moraene Roberts, gives an overview of 'participatory' approaches to research and inquiry into poverty in the UK. 'Participatory' approaches respect the expertise of people with direct experience of poverty and give them more control over the research process and more influence over how findings are used. The researchers examine the issues involved when principle turns into practice. They find that:

-  Reasons for using participatory approaches range from recognising the particular expertise of people with experience of poverty in putting forward their own realities - and their right to do so - to increasing the effectiveness of research and deepening understanding of poverty and policy impact.
-  Influences on participatory research in the UK include 'user involvement' and 'user control' in health and social care, and the 'emancipatory research' of the disabled people's movement. But probably most significant are the participatory approaches widely used in international development work; these are becoming better known here.
-  Participatory approaches to poverty research in the UK are gaining ground. But if they are to become mainstream practice, they will need to feed into national level processes and be linked to wider policy change.
-  Basic building blocks to make participatory approaches work include: time to allow people to go at their own pace; adequate financial and other support; and opportunities for personal exchange.
-  Key factors in getting the most from participation are: clarity about aims, rather than allowing limits of resources to dictate the extent and quality of participation; and involving people in poverty in making sense of the information produced, by using their 'insider expertise'.
-  The researchers conclude that social research funders should allow for the realistic resource requirements of participatory approaches. Organisations working to strengthen the 'voice' of people living in poverty also need adequate long-term support.

Background

This study focuses on the participation of people with direct experience of poverty in research and inquiry into poverty, especially at national level. Research is important because it shapes what kinds of knowledge and experience 'count', and helps frame images of poverty and people in poverty.

This study examined the 'added value' of participatory approaches to research and inquiry into poverty, and explored some of the debates involved. It gives an overview of participatory practice in research and inquiry into poverty in the UK and makes proposals about how to take these approaches forward.

Participatory approaches: what they are and how they can work

Participatory approaches to research are not about just including personal quotes in an otherwise unchanged research report, or adding 'subjective' feelings to the 'objective' findings of the researcher. They are about people with direct experience of poverty having more voice in the research process – from defining the issues to working out solutions. Participatory research also attempts to be an interactive process, rather than a one-off exercise extracting information from people.

But there can be different levels of involvement, and different numbers of people involved. In fact, participatory research can be seen more as an approach than consisting of specific techniques. Sometimes it is a form of joint inquiry by people with experience of poverty and others working together to investigate an issue. Basic building blocks to make participatory approaches work include time to allow people to go at their own pace; adequate financial and other support; and opportunities for personal exchange.

Reasons for using participatory approaches

Participatory approaches can 'add value':

- by **improving research**: enriching understanding of the lived realities of poverty, and arriving at policies which make sense to those affected;
- by **bringing gains for participants**: increasing the confidence and 'voice' of people in poverty - but also acting as a learning process for those not in poverty who are involved, and often resulting in the creation of new networks;
- by **embodying the principle of the right of people in poverty** to influence images of poverty and public debate; and by **strengthening their claims to other rights** and to full citizenship.

Participatory approaches to **monitoring and evaluation** can also identify what outcomes are important to those affected by policy interventions themselves. And they can help untangle complex processes of individual and community change.

Connections with other research approaches

Various other trends and approaches in research have connections with participatory research on poverty. In particular:

- '**emancipatory research**', as developed by the disabled people's movement, takes on the power relations involved in research and aims to change the social relations of research production, with disabled people in control;
- '**user involvement**', best-known in health and social care, is about users of services having more say in their design and delivery; '**user led/controlled**' research involves a greater degree of control by users themselves.

In relation to research on poverty:

- debate about the **ethics of researching poverty** has focused on acknowledging the power relations involved, and the real costs to participants, not only in terms of the time commitment needed but also, more importantly, in terms of how much has to be disclosed about personal experiences;
- there has been a growing recognition of the '**agency**' of **people in poverty**, and their strengths, rather than just treating them as passive victims;
- in **international development**, the principle that anti-poverty policies only work if they are based on the knowledge of people living in poverty is now widely accepted.

Examples of participatory practice in research and inquiry into poverty

The study looked at four examples of participatory practice (see boxed text). These ranged from two more traditional research exercises, one in the UK and one international, to two joint inquiries, one of which took place in the UK and one abroad. Each shows how those involved strove to be participatory in their approach despite constraints of time, funding and human relations. These case-studies tell the stories and draw out practical lessons.

Participatory practice in research and inquiry into poverty in the UK

Participatory practice is not yet seen as a central element of mainstream social research in the UK; but it is expanding, especially at local level. Recent developments in research on poverty provide a bridge linking traditional approaches with more participatory methods. Development organisations and others using participatory approaches from the 'south' of the globe are also starting to influence practice in the UK. The Cabinet Office recently produced guidelines for government departments on public involvement. The Scottish Executive is promoting experiments in local level participatory research. Several academic departments and national non-governmental

'Poverty First Hand'

This research in the UK involved 20 group discussions with people with past or present experience of poverty, based on issues identified in an earlier participatory meeting. Although they could not achieve their aims in full due to funding shortfalls, the researchers based their work on participatory principles and tried in a variety of ways to give participants greater control over the research process and the messages to be conveyed. They call for other similar projects to be undertaken.

(See: Beresford, P., Green, D., Lister, R. and Woodard, K., *Poverty First Hand: Poor people speak for themselves*, Child Poverty Action Group, 1999)

World Bank: 'Voices of the Poor'

Substantial participatory and qualitative research fed into the World Development Report 2000. Messages were conveyed from existing research; and new participatory research was also carried out, across many countries. This example showed that 'participatory' methods used in the 'south' often have useful lessons for the UK although they are not a blueprint to be copied. The people in poverty involved at the first stage did not influence the subsequent analysis - though the exercise probably succeeded in convincing the World Bank about the value of participatory approaches to poverty research.

(See: Narayan, D., Patel, R., Rademacher, A., Schafft, T. and Koch-Schulte, S., *Voices of the Poor: Can anyone hear us?*, Oxford University Press, 2000/2001)

Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power

The Commission was set up by the UK Coalition against Poverty, and supported by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, to investigate barriers to participation in decision-making faced by people in poverty. It followed a UK-wide consultation exercise with people living in poverty which used participatory methods from the 'south'. The Commission was made up of half 'grassroots' members with direct experience of poverty and half 'public life' members - with a shared commitment, but different kinds of expertise. So it was a form of joint inquiry. Its report reflected the often challenging exchanges between Commissioners in its vivid language and grounding in real life experience. Its recommendations about how to involve people in poverty in policy debates and decision-making have been promoted with government.

(See: Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power, *Listen Hear: The right to be heard*, The Policy Press (in association with UKCAP and JRF), 2000; 'The Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power: an evaluation', JRF Findings 7102, 2002/2001)

Pooling Knowledge on Poverty

ATD Fourth World, an international human rights organisation working with people living in long-term poverty, set up this joint inquiry to 'produce new knowledge and understanding out of the fight against persistent poverty', based on pooling academic knowledge, knowledge gained through action and knowledge from experience. The participants from France and Belgium who worked together over two years included academics, full-time volunteers from ATD Fourth World and people experiencing poverty who were ATD activists. They explored five themes: history, the family, knowledge and learning, work and citizenship. They found common ground in shared human experiences, and discovered that knowledge of different kinds could be of equivalent and equal value.

(See: ATD Fourth World, 'Introducing the knowledge of people living in poverty into an academic environment', *Fourth World Journal*, summer 1999)

organisations also use participatory principles in their research. But major challenges now include finding ways of feeding into national level processes and of engaging with topical policy debates.

Promise and possibilities, problems and pitfalls

'Participation' can be used to evoke almost anything involving people. So its meanings need to be unpacked, to make sense of claims that research is 'participatory' - going beyond the principle, to explore what it means in practice.

- Issues about the 'who' include the problem of the label 'poverty' itself, and the differences of power

even within groups of people living in poverty or in poor communities - cosy consensus cannot be assumed. People may want a more or less active role, and their participation should not be seen as cost-free or compulsory. Instead of 'full' participation, what may make more sense is 'optimum' participation; the key is clarity about aims, rather than allowing limits of time and money to dictate the extent and quality of participation. People living in poverty may have high expectations of the researcher's power, or low expectations of change. Participants need information, and often different kinds of support, to make the most of their involvement. But participatory approaches do not have to rule out other people being involved as well.

- Issues about the 'how' include whether research involves people in poverty only as suppliers of information, or whether they have greater control – the core of participatory approaches. Involving people in poverty in making sense of the information produced, by using their 'insider expertise', may be more important than employing them as interviewers. Participatory research can produce numbers ('pooled people's knowledge'), as well as qualitative information. Findings should be 'triangulated' with data obtained by other methods; and methods can often be combined, using each in turn to inform the other.
- Issues about the 'what' include whether participatory research is just about allowing the voice of people in poverty to be heard in an unfiltered way - or a more complicated process, in which everyone involved has a stake. Whatever the ideal, participatory research may often in practice be an attempt to combine different forms of knowledge in a way which tries to create a more equal and two-way dynamic between the 'researcher' and the 'researched'. Some experiments are also now being carried out using more deliberative methods of inquiry, which move away from just listening and transmitting 'voices' towards more sustained dialogue and debate, therefore also opening up opportunities for policy influencing.

Conclusions and recommendations

The researchers conclude that the case for participatory approaches to research and inquiry into poverty rests on the right of people in poverty to put forward their own realities; the particular expertise they have in doing so, which gives 'added value'; and the opportunities it can give them to influence policy and practice. Participatory forms of research and inquiry are unlikely in themselves to achieve social change. But they can be used by existing organisations to strengthen their own voice; and they can help create new relationships for bringing about change in the longer term.

To promote participatory approaches to research and inquiry into poverty, the researchers recommend that:

- **social research funders** could take more account of the realistic requirements of more participatory forms of research and inquiry, especially in terms of resources and time, and undertake to cover such additional support needs; and those funders already committed to exploring the potential of participatory approaches could promote these in exchanges with others.
- **social researchers** could be given more opportunities to experiment with using

participatory methods; and practitioners could work more with key institutions to embed participatory processes more firmly.

- **a UK-wide network** of social researchers could be set up to stimulate discussion between people working in participatory ways on poverty research.
- **government** could try to be more flexible and open-ended about monitoring and evaluation. Policy-makers need to be introduced to participatory approaches, and engage with people in poverty - but practitioners must also be aware of policy-makers' needs. Spaces for sustained debates between policy-makers and people with experience of poverty need to be increased. And adequate funding should be provided to organisations working with people living in poverty.

'For once, they have not written about us without us.'
(Participant at launch of Pooling Knowledge on Poverty study, 1999)

About this project

The report was written by Fran Bennett, social policy analyst/academic, in co-operation with Moraene Roberts, an anti-poverty activist with ATD Fourth World who has direct experience of poverty. Both have experience of trying to put participatory approaches into practice, and had close connections with some of the experiments described in the report. The process of producing the report was not planned as a participatory exercise in itself; but it did involve input from people with direct experience of poverty and others involved in participatory ways of working. The report therefore drew on the knowledge and experience of many different individuals and organisations and the authors would like to thank them all.

How to get further information

The full report, **From input to influence: Participatory approaches to research and inquiry into poverty** by Fran Bennett with Moraene Roberts, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (ISBN 1 85935 177 8, price £15.95).