The environmental concerns of disadvantaged groups

People on low incomes are often those worst affected by environmental problems and environmental policies sometimes conflict with their social and economic well-being. Little is known, however, about their environmental views and priorities. A report by Kate Burningham and Diana Thrush at the University of Surrey explored the environmental concerns of members of disadvantaged groups in four settings: a deprived urban neighbourhood; a deprived urban estate where people live close to busy roads; an ex-mining village where people live close to a chemical factory; and a rural area within a National Park. The study found that:

- Interviewees' environmental concerns focused on the impact of local problems on health and well-being.

- Issues such as pollution, which appear most problematic from an external viewpoint, were not necessarily those of most concern at a local level. 'Minor' problems, such as dog fouling and litter, often received more attention.

- Residents emphasised positive aspects of their homes and were troubled by outsiders' perceptions of their neighbourhoods as polluted, derelict or dirty.

- Participants were largely unfamiliar with the language of environmentalism and commented on the lack of locally accessible information. Some individuals, however, demonstrated an understanding of and concern for the wider environment.

- Practical and financial considerations were prime motivators for individual environmental action. Many participants recycled household waste. However, some were unable to do so as facilities were inaccessible or homes lacked storage space. Although saving energy was widely recognised as beneficial, it was irrelevant for those individuals who were unable to afford sufficient energy to heat their damp and draughty homes.

- In the three run-down neighbourhoods, social, economic and environmental goals were often inextricably linked. For people in the attractive rural locality, conflicts between environmental and socio-economic demands were evident.

Background

Although environmentalism is sometimes described as a middle-class concern, disadvantaged groups often suffer most from environmental problems. Those on low incomes are the most likely to live near polluting roads or factories and to endure poor quality housing and amenities. They also spend a disproportionate amount on 'environmental goods' such as energy, food and water.

Environmental improvements enhance quality of life for disadvantaged people, yet policies pursued in isolation from social and economic considerations may exacerbate existing hardships. Examples include the disproportionate effect of increases in energy and fuel prices, conflict between rural conservation and the need for affordable housing, and the desire to maintain industrial employment whilst minimising pollution.

This study aimed to develop a detailed understanding of the environmental perspectives and concerns of disadvantaged groups.

Local concerns

Local issues received most attention in all four areas. Apart from the issue of pollution in the former mining village, none of the groups initially thought of these problems as 'environmental'. The phrase 'local environment' was foreign to most participants. However, after discussion, a broad definition emerged that included various aspects of 'the surroundings'; local concerns were then discussed as local 'environmental' problems.

Concerns in deprived neighbourhoods

Concerns about the dirty run-down state of the area were expressed in the two urban areas and the ex-mining village. Health and safety implications were of particular concern.

Problems of dog mess and litter, blamed on irresponsible individuals who "don't care", were considered difficult to address. Many expressed the need to enforce regulations, whether through caretakers, park wardens or police walking the streets.

Local authorities were considered primarily responsible for maintaining local environmental quality and were criticised for failing to do so. Failure to remedy problems was seen to lead to further deterioration.

Interviewees understood the relationship between social, economic and environmental elements. For example, the anti-social behaviour of unemployed youths was felt to affect the safety and amenity of the local environment. In turn, an improved physical environment was expected to reap social dividends. One man commented:

> "If you're in a different environment you wouldn't talk the way you talk here, or fight the way you fight here, because the people would be different you know, folk over here … they've no pride in the environment."

What appear as obvious environmental problems to an outsider are not necessarily of most concern to residents. In the group living close to busy roads, participants acknowledged the dangers but regarded them merely as a local fact of life. To some extent, the same was true of those living close to the chemical factory:

> "I don't think of it as a problem. Perhaps it's because I've grown up with it as most of us have. It's like a wart on the back of your neck. You know it's there, but it doesn't really bother you. Occasionally you'll go for a hair cut and the barber will nick it and it will bleed. It's the same kind of problem with [the factory]. It's there."

Attitudes here were more complex, however, with serious health-related concerns tempered by loyalty towards a factory which was formerly a significant local employer.

This research supports the observation that deprived neighbourhoods are often characterised by pollution, decay and dereliction. This is only one aspect of local life, however, and not necessarily the most significant. Interviewees often attempted to put complaints into a broader context and emphasise the universality of problems. Most people found something to praise about their locality and relationships with friends and family were central. Perhaps most importantly, participants saw their locality as 'home'.

Negative images of their 'home' were met with anger. Casual descriptions of localities as 'poor' or 'polluted' offended residents, who saw such descriptions as stigmatising their home and, by extension, themselves.

Concerns in an attractive rural environment

Discussions of the relationship between environmental and social disadvantage tend to focus on experiences within deprived neighbourhoods. Whilst low-income residents of attractive rural villages often value their surroundings highly, beautiful countryside does not alleviate hardship and those suffering rural poverty face distinct problems.

People living in a picturesque locality may benefit from the local tourist industry. Whilst some interviewees acknowledged this advantage, others questioned the real value of tourism in the area. They accused the local council of engaging in extravagant schemes to promote tourism rather than maintaining essential local infrastructure:

> "Money is spent on the people that come into the area, not for the people that live in the area."

The influx of tourists was also associated with pollution:

> "When the tourists are about in the high season and there's no wind the readings for pollutants are the

highest anywhere … it's something to do with the length of the traffic queues on a busy weekend and bank holidays."

The price of local property was said to be "absolutely astronomical" and a lack of affordable rented accommodation was noted. Many properties are sold as commuter or holiday homes. This influx of newcomers appeared to have a negative effect on community life in the villages:

"Well, we knew everyone when I was young, we knew every family, every child and now you don't know people."

Village shops often cater primarily for tourists. This posed little problem for affluent incomers "because they've all got two cars", but others were dependent on lifts or inadequate public transport in order to reach shops with a wider range of goods at affordable prices.

Protecting the environment by reducing car use was considered irrelevant; such messages were seen as a threat to residents of remote villages reliant on vehicles for work and domestic uses. Interviewees' main concern was with the cost of running a car:

"You have to worry and think about that every time you go anywhere, about transport costs."

Wider environmental concerns

Participants discussed environmental problems at a local rather than national or global level. This might be interpreted as stemming from very real anxieties about meeting basic economic needs, leaving little time for wider or more abstract concerns. Indeed, some explained they could not see beyond the present:

"I don't think in the long term … I live for the day and see what tomorrow brings so I don't overly worry about these things."

Others felt environmental problems were too distant or long term, saying priority should be given to immediate problems:

"You have enough problems of your own to cope with so you don't worry about things that aren't actually affecting you at the moment …"

Though the language of environmentalism was unfamiliar, interviewees identified several global environmental problems. The major concern was pollution of all types, perhaps because, with clearly identified causes and consequences, it is relatively easily understood. In addition, many have directly experienced it, particularly in deprived neighbourhoods. Awareness of a global-local link was most evident for issues relating to pollution; individuals identified local incidents as part of a wider problem, particularly in areas where local pollution was a key issue.

Concern for future generations is an important

aspect of environmental consciousness. There was evidence of concern about the environment that is being passed on to future generations:

"You sometimes wonder if you had this same meeting in fifty years time when we're all gone and our kids are sat round here, what the problems are going to be facing them and what state the … environment will be in."

Concern and interest regarding wider environmental issues varied considerably. Some people were keenly interested, wanting to know more and frustrated by a lack of accessible information.

Environmental organisations

Little was known about environmental organisations beyond media stereotypes of 'eco-warriors' and Greenpeace direct action. There was ambivalence about the role of activists, often regarded as too extreme or "behaving like stupid little kids", though some participants felt they were engaged in important work:

"I mean we all take the mickey out of things, Friends of the Earth, eco-warriors ... but to be honest they are fighting for the Earth. They're fighting to keep it clean … they're fighting for our rights and we're taking the mickey."

There was usually agreement that "somebody has to stand up" and that what environmental organisations did was worthwhile.

No one interviewed belonged to any such organisation; this was often explained in terms of lack of local presence ("there's none round here") and insufficient information:

"Locally … you have no contact with them … there's nobody that would come round and recruit. You would never see anybody coming round and say, 'Come and join the WWF', 'Would you like to join the National Trust?'."

Individual environmental action

All groups discussed individual environmental actions. Women spoke more of recycling, shopping and energy-saving measures; they were largely responsible for household decisions.

Recycling

The most familiar action was recycling. Beyond a general belief that "it's more environmentally friendly", the underlying rationale was seldom explicit. Some participants wanted more information:

"I think if it was explained why we're recycling and give us the opportunity to do it, I think a lot of people would do it."

People who recycled often gave practical reasons for their actions; several mothers considered recycling

bottles was safer than throwing them out with the rubbish. Those who did not recycle -particularly older people and those less mobile - were often deterred by practicalities: facilities were unavailable, too distant, or homes lacked storage space.

Green consumption

Most participants had not considered this. Many expressed confusion about claims made for 'green' products, older people being particularly puzzled over organic and non-genetically-modified food. Apart from not understanding the possible merits, the most commonly cited reason for avoiding 'green' purchases was expense.

Conserving resources

Participants were familiar with several methods for saving energy and water. Energy conservation was undertaken mainly for financial reasons, although many participants were aware of the environmental benefits:

> "In the winter now I turn everything off an hour before we go to bed, like the heating, because we just can't afford to … so we have hot-water bottles and go to bed. But you know that way I'm helping the environment."

Although saving energy was widely recognised as beneficial, it was irrelevant for those individuals who were unable to afford sufficient energy to warm/heat their damp and draughty homes.

Conclusion

The study found considerable interest in the quality of the local environment and its effects on health and well-being. This often centred on relatively minor issues, such as dog-fouling and waste in public spaces. This is in line with the findings of several surveys, suggesting that small-scale changes could considerably improve quality of life for local residents. However, many of the small problems identified were seen as symptomatic of deeper, wider and more complex underlying issues. Participants identified the lack of jobs and leisure facilities for young people as the cause of many local amenity and safety problems. If sustainable solutions to local environmental problems are to be found, these wider issues need to be addressed; cleaning dirty streets and enforcing standards will not alone deliver lasting change. This highlights an urgent need for integrated environmental, social and economic policy.

The need for integrated policy applies particularly to rural residents. Residents saw the desire to preserve and market the rural environment for tourism as conflicting with their needs for affordable housing and everyday amenities. In addition, current transport policy was perceived as ignoring their reliance on cars.

Placing local environmental issues within a broader justice and equality agenda has helped mobilise disadvantaged communities in the US. Whilst the UK situation differs in important respects, the extent of residents' local pride may provide a fertile basis for campaigns to protect and improve the quality of neglected localities. There is a danger, however, that the language of environmental justice, which links 'poor people' and 'poor environments', might not only reinforce a negative image in some localities but may ignore the distinctive problems faced by poor people living in 'good/desirable/beautiful' rural environments.

About the study

This report is based on research in Glasgow, London, North Wales and the Peak District. Focus groups were carried out with members of disadvantaged groups in each locality, with a total of 89 participants. Each group met twice, discussing local concerns before moving to wider environmental issues in the second meeting. Additional interviews were conducted with key people in national environmental organisations, organisations representing the concerns of disadvantaged groups and those working in local regeneration and environmental initiatives in each area.

How to get further information

The full report, **"Rainforests are a long way from here": The environmental concerns of disadvantaged groups** by Kate Burningham and Diana Thrush, is published for the Foundation by YPS as part of the Reconciling Environmental and Social Concerns series (ISBN 1 84263 028 8, price £12.95).