



Listen hear

The right to be heard

Report of the Commission on Poverty,
Participation and Power

SUMMARY

People living in poverty face many barriers when it comes to taking part in decision making. Not enough money. Not enough information. Not enough confidence. The list goes on.

But that's not the main problem. The main problem is that too often people experiencing poverty don't feel respected. Too often they aren't respected.

And what is the ultimate disrespect? Being involved in phoney participation by people who don't listen, when things don't change. Phoney because it doesn't lead to a shift in power. No wonder that many people experiencing poverty adopt the defence of cynicism, or anger. No wonder that increasingly they don't vote – and don't participate in other ways either.

But we all lose out when people living in poverty don't participate.

Participation will only work if it reaches out to everyone. It must involve a change in attitudes and behaviour by politicians and professionals. It must make a difference. And unless that happens, policies to tackle poverty and revitalise democracy will not succeed.

“The key is what locks people out of participation... Well it should be handed over.”

Exchange between two Commissioners at a meeting of the
Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power

THE RIGHT TO BE HEARD

Participation by people experiencing poverty is a basic human right. And it is also essential for better quality decision making. Yet the Commission found that too often:

- people in poverty are not respected
- rhetoric is not being translated into reality
- power is not being shared
- too many participation exercises are phoney, and therefore destined to fail
- not all the voices are heard
- professional attitudes and behaviour undermine participation
- messages aren't getting through
- the value of volunteering and unpaid community work is not recognised or respected
- not enough time is allowed for effective participation
- nor are enough resources to support it.

“ People with little or no power are made to believe there is no point in raising their voice, as it will make no difference. That they will not be listened to by those who have power and control.

”
A speaker at the People's Parliament,
Voices for Change, Scotland Conference

FROM MISTRUST TO MAKING A DIFFERENCE

At the last general election, in 1997, the percentage of people voting was the lowest since 1945, and particularly low in poorer areas. The evidence gathered by the Commission revealed the stark division between government, policy makers and decision makers and the people they claim to represent. The Commission found that many people experiencing poverty were cynical about all the talk of social inclusion, and critical of the way participation has been tackled. This coloured their views of the latest policy statements and initiatives.

Ministers have recognised the benefits of increased participation, especially at local level; and the devolved administrations are relating to their populations in new ways.

There **has** been a shift in policies and practice in recent years. But without changes in attitudes and behaviour, this will not be enough. **It is time the rhetoric was translated into reality – EVERY time.**

“ *People in poverty are not saying they don't want to participate; they are saying they will not engage in disrespectful meetings.* ”

” Commissioner

“ *Where are the decision makers? We invited so many councillors and council officials and they are not here. The leader of the council and the MP made their speeches and then scarpered. One councillor said he had to go to another meeting in the council house. They were discussing 'citizenship and democracy'! They should have been discussing it with us, here.* ”

Voices for Change, South West England

MAKING PARTICIPATION REAL

The Commission found clear examples of participation going wrong. But it was also encouraged by the tenacity and resilience of many people making a difference in their communities. And it found examples of participatory ways of working which were making individual's lives better and communities stronger. These examples must be built on.

'Participation' is not enough by itself. It can just involve the same people all the time. And it can reinforce the status quo. It can operate as an echo, reflecting back the voices of the people organising the participation, even if they have learned new techniques.

If it is not to work like this – if it is to be genuine – participation must first of all be inclusive. In particular, it must reach out to people experiencing poverty, and the most excluded groups. And it must involve accountability – it must make a real difference.

“ *People ask: how is this meeting going to change my life? – and if they can't see how, they won't go. Whatever is done, you need to ensure the change affects their lives.* ”

” Commissioner

“ *Local people are the real stakeholders; they want to eradicate poverty – and they have the ideas to do it.* ”

Voices for Change, Northern Ireland

RECOMMENDATIONS

The commission see its report as the first step, vital step, focusing on the voices calling for urgent change. But the next step is to ensure that real change happens. We propose that:

the UK government and devolved administrations should each set up a task force – made up of people with direct experience of poverty, and people with experience of participatory ways of working here and abroad – to draw up recommendations on ways to ensure that people experiencing poverty can participate in decision-making processes affecting their lives.

There have been task forces before. But these would be different. Task forces don't usually include people experiencing poverty; these would. This would mean new ways of working, creative insights and radical ideas. **We have 10 suggestions to guide the government and the task forces:**

- 1 Looking at policies on poverty? Involve the real experts**
People living in poverty and their organisations should be fully involved in the design and implementation of anti-poverty programmes and strategies
- 2 How is it working? Ask the people who know**
People living in poverty should be involved in developing ways to monitor and assess the impact of anti-poverty programmes and strategies. The department of Social Security should also encourage user involvement of people on benefits at local and national level.
- 3 Want people to participate? Stop punishing them!**
In the short term, national directions on the local administration of benefit rules on availability for work and incapacity should be clearer, to ensure they don't penalise those doing voluntary or community work. In the longer term, there should be an audit of barriers to participation created by the benefits system, involving people on benefits themselves, and a review of how the social security system could be adapted to value voluntary and community work.
- 4 All policies affect people in poverty – ask them how**
People living in poverty should be involved in evaluating all policies with an impact on their lives.
- 5 Usual methods + the usual suspects = old answers – find new ways to work!**
Strategies to improve democracy and consultation should be adapted to ensure that people experiencing poverty can take part.
- 6 Ground rules for getting it right**
People experiencing poverty should be involved in developing benchmarks to ensure their performance against these.
- 7 Raise expectations of rights**
Young people should be encouraged to see themselves as having rights to take part in decision-making, through the curriculum and their involvement in how schools are run.
- 8 Give us the money!**
The authorities should ensure adequate funding for participation in decision-making processes by people experiencing poverty at all levels.
- 9 Carrots and sticks for people with power**
The culture of organisations, and the rewards and sanctions for people working for them, must be changed, to make participatory approaches work.
- 10 Share what works**
Lessons about participatory methods and ways of working should be shared more quickly.

“ We are not inferior – we are not deficient – but we are made to feel that way. You have the power to change things – listen to our voice!

**Report of local consultation in Wales,
as part ofVoices for Change project**

*“ We want our voices heard...
We are more than just a postcode...*

Listen to our views.

Young people, Scotland, part ofVoices for Change project

The **Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power** firmly believes that participation in decision-making processes by people experiencing poverty would:

- improve decision making;
- empower individuals and communities; and
- promote a healthier democracy, in which everyone feels involved.

So in **Listen hear**, it makes recommendations for action at local and national level to achieve this. A new kind of task force – including people experiencing poverty – would take this forward.

Listen hear: The right to be heard draws on:

- the experience of **Voices for Change**, a two-year consultation with people experiencing poverty throughout the UK to identify the barriers which prevent them participating in decision making
- the **meetings of the Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power**, which was set up to consider the evidence from the Voices for Change process and elsewhere, and to recommend ways to tackle these barriers to participation
- the **varied expertise and experience of all the members of the Commission**, made up of half 'grassroots' activists and half 'public life' representatives
- the **Commission's visits to local areas** throughout the UK, to meet with Voices for Change area steering groups and to investigate good and bad practice in participation
- the **Commission's meetings with policy makers**, to discover their views on the participation of people experiencing poverty in decision making and how it can be improved.

NEW KNOWLEDGE – DIFFERENT DEMOCRACY

If people experiencing poverty were fully involved in decision making and policy processes, we would create a new form of knowledge and a different kind of democracy. We would see:

- not just individuals contacting their MPs about individual problems, but groups of people who experience poverty discussing solutions to problems with policy makers
- not just consultation, but also genuine participation – where people feel they can make a real difference...
- ...not just to programme delivery, but also to design and performance standards
- not just consultation with local communities or the public in general, but also reaching out to marginalised individuals and communities of interest
- not just input into local, but also national, level policies by people living in poverty
- not just influence on individual policies, but also on the priorities between them
- not just involvement in one-off occasions, but an ongoing dialogue.

The UK Coalition Against Poverty (UKCAP), which developed the Voices for Change project and the Commission, was set up in 1996 and now has some 160 member organisations. UKCAP believes that poverty must be eradicated. Its key aims are to improve anti-poverty policies by linking policy makers with people who have direct experience of poverty, and to campaign for more systematic and holistic anti-poverty strategies and policies. It maintains the principle of a balance in its committees and subgroups between people with direct experience of poverty and others.

For further information about UKCAP and the Commission contact UKCAP, c/o OBAC, Gloucester House, 8 Camberwell New Road, London SE5 0RZ. A bibliography, and further copies of the summary, are also available from UKCAP, free of charge.

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