

UK Policy Agenda: Oxfam's UK Poverty Programme

The proposals set out below highlight issues where Oxfam believes government policy and strategy need to be developed and further action taken in order to promote poverty reduction, social justice and a fair society for all.

Oxfam believes that poverty, social exclusion and discrimination represent a denial of human rights, preventing people from exercising their full rights (e.g. to housing, adequate health care, education, to an adequate standard of living). We endorse the view of Parliament's Joint Committee for Human Rights that a rights-based approach can assist government in addressing poverty¹.

Rationale

Considerable progress has been made in the UK in recent years in developing a legal and institutional framework to promote civil and political rights (eg. the introduction of the 1998 Human Rights Act). But the principles set out in international law have frequently been overshadowed in practice by emphasis on the responsibilities of citizens - particularly of those from the poorest sections of society. Many of those on low incomes struggle to fulfil their responsibilities owing to the disempowering nature of the poverty, social exclusion and discrimination they face. Moreover, their everyday experience is frequently one of disrespect – being rendered invisible by decision makers and not having appropriate opportunities to put forward their views².

Oxfam believes:

On Poverty, human rights and participation

- forums should be established for regular structured input into policy and decision-making by people facing poverty, social exclusion and discrimination at UK, devolved and regional levels
- Government should play a lead role in improving public attitudes about poverty and about poor people. Pejorative language and the linking of certain groups with the long-standing notion of the 'deserving and undeserving' poor reinforce the social isolation and exclusion felt by many poor women and men.

Rationale:

Oxfam's experience demonstrates that poverty is not just about economic need, but also about not having the power or voice to change things for the better. The participation of women and men on low incomes is an essential component of anti-poverty strategies, and can result in the development of more effective and more relevant policies. Such policies can also help to challenge the negative stereotypes and prejudice that impact on people in poverty, and strengthen their claims to full citizenship:

On Income and wealth inequality:

- Government should foster public debate about why inequality matters, and harness public support for further measures to build a fairer society where rewards are more justly distributed. Over 80 per cent of the population think the gap between high and low incomes is too large, according to social surveys³.
- There should be a cap on interest rates and appropriate steps should be taken to improve the supply and lower the cost of credit for those on the lowest incomes. Poor people face higher costs and limited choice when it comes to financial services. In 2002, 7.8 million consumers were denied access to mainstream credit and had to borrow in the more expensive 'sub-prime' market, including from 'doorstep' lenders who can charge in excess of 300 per cent APR⁴.

Rationale:

Although the current Government has taken action to reduce poverty since it came to power (eg. through increased funding for health and education; introduction of a minimum wage; and progress towards eliminating child poverty), income and wealth inequalities have grown – despite some 'redistribution by stealth'. For example, the incomes of the richest 1% have risen sharply since 1997, and the wealthiest 10% of the population now own more than half the country's wealth⁵. Oxfam's international experience suggests that inequality undermines poverty reduction and economic growth, and that the consequences of high levels of inequality (on poverty, life chances, social mobility) are often ignored. If a fairer society is to be created, it is important to take action to tackle both poverty and income/wealth inequality:

On Gender equality:

- Government anti-poverty strategies should have an explicit gender perspective, and gender equality should be 'mainstreamed' across all government departments. In particular, gender budgeting should be applied to all departmental spending to ensure that overall resources address women's greater risk of poverty, building on recent pilot analysis within the Treasury.
- Homeworkers must have full employment status, and the most vulnerable workers must be offered the full protection enjoyed by other workers⁶. Some groups of workers in low paid vulnerable employment, such as homeworkers, 90% of whom are women, need stronger employment protection, in order to be able to access the October 04 improvements to the National Minimum Wage (NMW) regulations. In particular, without proper employment status, any homeworker who claims the NMW is likely to lose all future work without any notice, compensation or adequate right of redress.

- The Commission on Women and Work should emphasise and address the precarious position of many women outside the formal labour market. The Commission is right to highlight a range of factors underpinning the gender pay gap, and in particular the undervaluing of ‘women’s work’ (and caring in particular).
- Engaging men is an essential element of efforts to build gender equality. Attempts to involve them through support for project interventions based on clear gender analysis can encourage them to take greater responsibility in relation to issues such as fatherhood, health, and gender-based violence⁷. Lessons from successful initiatives, such as the Objective 1 programme to support men disengaged from the labour market in South Yorkshire, should be more widely disseminated.

Rationale:

One in four women lives in poverty⁸, and men are more likely to be in the top forty per cent of the income distribution than women. This is largely due to factors such as the gender pay gap, the concentration of women in part-time work, inadequate pension provisions, lone parenthood, the lack of affordable childcare, and the undervaluing of care work⁹. Women (and men) from some black and minority ethnic backgrounds also have a higher risk of poverty. Whilst women are the majority of those living in poverty, the position of some groups of men in the UK at the sharp end of economic and social change is also a cause for concern.

On Asylum:

- Political leadership is necessary in order to reverse rather than exacerbate the climate of hostility towards asylum seekers. To date the media and political discourse have played a central role in raising public fears and exacerbating hostility towards them, resulting in daily threats and abuse for asylum seekers and others. MORI poll evidence¹⁰ showed that public perception is that the UK hosts 23% of the world’s refugees and asylum seekers, rather than the true figure of 1.89%.
- Support provided to asylum seekers is often inadequate or poorly provided so that most are forced to live at an unacceptable level of poverty, experiencing hunger and ill health. While provision must be improved, asylum seekers do not want to be dependent on benefits. Allowing them to work while they are awaiting a decision on their status would enable them to contribute to society and the economy and would restore their dignity¹¹.
- Resources must be focussed on a fair and efficient decision making process, based on getting decisions right in the first instance. The system must be based on accurate and objective country of origin information and supported by proper legal advice.

- While the UK has a legitimate right to secure its borders, government must ensure that border and interception measures do not have the effect of closing off all access to asylum. Off-shore immigration controls must include appropriate safeguards to ensure that those in need of protection are able to seek asylum. Plans to assist refugees in their regions of origin or resettle individuals could make a contribution to improving conditions and protecting those selected, if properly resourced and controlled, but these must not be considered a substitute for a fair domestic asylum system.

Rationale:

The UK poverty programme works with refugees and asylum seekers in Scotland and Wales to monitor press portrayals and public perceptions and to ensure that they are portrayed in a more positive light. We also support the work of grassroots organisations that work with destitute asylum seekers. Based on this, we work closely with the Refugee Council to develop evidence-based policy analysis. Oxfam also works on the international dimensions of UK and EU asylum policy, linking our work in the UK with our expertise of humanitarian protection of displaced people globally¹².

As a signatory to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, which has helped to save thousands of lives since its introduction, the UK has a humanitarian obligation to provide protection to those fleeing persecution or human rights abuse. This obligation must be upheld by full and fair assessment of the claims of each individual applicant for asylum, irrespective of their route to the UK.

On protecting migrants:

- Government must take steps to ratify the 1990 UN Convention on the Rights of Migrant Workers and their Families
- Government must address the root causes of migration from developing countries by promoting economic growth with equity, poverty eradication, improved governance and reduced conflict. It must also seek to ensure that inward migration does not have a negative impact on developing countries, in particular by draining them of very limited skilled human resources
- Government should pursue a policy of managed migration for low-skilled workers which is flexible enough to enable them to adjust to prevailing labour market and social conditions within the UK. It should provide low-skilled migrant workers with the opportunity to settle in the UK and integrate fully into UK life, after a reasonable period, in line with other managed migration schemes into the UK.
- Government should establish a comprehensive support and education system for migrants on arrival in the UK, aimed at educating them about the UK labour market, their legal rights and obligations as workers, advice and support on finding a job, how to access services, general social and cultural information about the UK and English language teaching

- Irregular workers without legal status currently in the UK should have their status regularised with permission to work for one year
- All employers must uphold minimum labour standards and should be held responsible for any breaches in those standards, regardless of the status of their employees.

Rationale:

In 2003 Oxfam co-published a report with the Fabian Society *Exploding the Migration Myths – Analysis and Recommendations for the EU, the UK and Albania* which considered the impact of migration for both sending and recipient countries, at the household and community level.

Oxfam believes that migration patterns need to be understood within the context of global poverty and inequality. Down the ages, migration has been a strategy used by individuals for escaping poverty. In Britain, the political discourse about migration often overlooks the significant contribution made by migrants both to the UK (about £ 2.5 billion more per year to government revenues than they draw from benefits and public services¹³) and the sending country economies (in the form of remittances). There is a danger that political parties overlook the need to protect the rights of migrants, many of whom experience inhumane working conditions, sexual abuse and violence, lack of protection, family separation and/or breakdown, and debt and discrimination¹⁴.

¹ Joint Committee On Human Rights - Twenty-First Report, HL 183/HC 1188, 20 October 2004

² *Listen Hear: The Right to be Heard*, Report of the Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power, 2000 www.oxfamgb.org/ukpp/heard/listenhear_summary.htm

³ *The State of the Nation, An audit of Injustice in the UK*, Will Paxton and Mike Dixon, IPPR 2004

⁴ *Everyday essentials: meeting basic needs, research into accessing basic goods and services*, National Consumer Council, 2004

⁵ www.inlandrevenue.gov.uk/stats/personal_wealth/dopw_t04_1.htm

⁶ Oxfam GB, National Group on Homeworking, TUC H*Made at Home: British workers in global supply chains*, 2004

⁷ Ruxton S., *Men, Masculinities and Poverty in the UK*, Oxfam GB 2002, www.oxfamgb.org/ukpp/resources/#gender

⁸ *Gender and Poverty*, Bradshaw et al, EOC, 2003. Data taken from the 1999/00 Family Resource Survey

⁹ *Gender and Poverty*, Rosenblatt and Rake, Fawcett Society, www.oxfamgb.org/ukpp/resources/downloads/gender_and_poverty.pdf

¹⁰ Mori Social Research Institute 2002

¹¹ *Poverty and Asylum in the UK*, Oxfam GB and Refugee Council, 2002, www.oxfamgb.org/ukpp/resources/#asylum

¹² *Foreign territory: the internationalisation of EU asylum policy* Oxfam March 2005 with case studies from Sri Lanka, Tanzania and DRC.

¹³ *Migration: an Economic and Social Analysis* Home Office 2001

¹⁴ Rogaly B. and Anderson B., *Forced labour and migration to the UK* TUC February 2005