

National strategy for  
neighbourhood  
renewal:  
A framework for  
consultation

**A response from Oxfam GB**

June 2000

# National strategy for neighbourhood renewal: A framework for consultation

## *Executive Summary*

### **1. Introduction**

Oxfam GB works in over 70 countries worldwide, which for the last few years has included the UK. This response is based on Oxfam's work both in the UK and overseas, and in particular on its work in conjunction with partner organisations on issues of rights and participation. Oxfam welcomes the opportunity to take part in the consultation on the draft framework for a national strategy for neighbourhood renewal.

### **2. Overview**

- Oxfam congratulates the Social Exclusion Unit on the report, and in particular on the process leading up to and following it.
- We welcome the growing recognition of the right of those living in poor communities to have a say in shaping the decisions affecting their lives.
- Oxfam welcomes the scrupulous use of language in the report, as we believe it is essential for people involved in debates about poverty and disadvantaged areas to exercise great care in their use of language and imagery.
- This response: sets out some general comments; focuses on the chapters on reviving local economies and communities; and comments on gender issues and the positive contribution which approaches used overseas can make in this policy area.

### **3. The focus and framework of the report**

- The government should carry through the consultative approach exhibited in debates around the neighbourhood renewal strategy into policy-making in other areas, and further develop it into a participatory approach involving all relevant stakeholders.
- The government should consider carefully the potential, and cumulative, impact of all its existing policies on people living in disadvantaged areas, not only for its own sake, but also in order to ensure the success of the neighbourhood renewal strategy.
- The government should develop mechanisms to ensure that all new policies are subject to prior assessment, to gauge any potential impact on groups living in poverty, and to ensure they are oriented to reducing poverty, social exclusion and inequalities.
- We would add to the four key outcomes (in jobs, education, crime and health) an additional criterion for success, in terms of community capacity-building.
- People in poverty should be involved in a participatory way at all levels of governance and in all stages of planning in determining the direction of strategies to tackle poverty and disadvantage, including setting priorities and measures of success.
- The final version of the strategy should discuss the most effective unit of intervention to achieve policy and practice change in disadvantaged areas.
- It should also include some consideration of all policy areas which impact on the lives of people in disadvantaged areas, including social security and the environment.

- Adequate funding levels for core service provision in disadvantaged areas will be crucial for neighbourhood renewal to succeed; in addition, if resources are to be withdrawn for underperformance, this will exacerbate the problems of service users.
- There is a case for seeing policies for groups other than just young people from a broader perspective than an area-based one; ultimately serious consideration should be given to integrating neighbourhood renewal and national anti-poverty strategies.
- The government should not underestimate the lack of trust in local and national politicians and the investment of time, resources and good faith needed to overcome it.
- Core principles for policy and practice at neighbourhood level should be developed, including making prejudiced attitudes towards people in poverty unacceptable.
- The final report should include a more detailed discussion of targets and indicators.

#### **4. Reviving local economies (chapter 5)**

##### ***Key questions:***

*5.1: is this the right vision for reviving the economies of deprived neighbourhoods?*

*5.2: are the proposed changes the right ones?*

*5.3: have important issues been missed?*

- Given its centrality as a cause of area decline, employment could have been given greater weight in the report.
- Because of the impact of national, European and global developments on local employment and area-based deprivation, the final report could consider in more detail the macro-economic policies at these levels which are needed to ensure stable investment in disadvantaged communities to create sustainable, secure employment.
- A review of the current remit for the regional development agencies to put more emphasis on tackling regional inequalities could be key to neighbourhood renewal.
- Different strategies for economic and employment revival may be needed in disadvantaged rural areas.
- An early warning system could prevent economic problems causing area decline.
- The Treasury's argument that jobless people in disadvantaged areas live within reach of job vacancies underplays the spatial concentration of worklessness and the barriers to mobility for such jobseekers - but highlights transport as a key issue in such areas.
- More consideration should be given to using local planning agreements proactively to encourage more intensive and sustainable employment creation in poor areas.
- There should be greater understanding of the survival strategies of people on the margins of the formal employment sector, with policies building on their strengths.
- The 'best value' regime for local authorities should use the creation of local employment opportunities as one criterion for assessment.
- The strategies of keeping money within the neighbourhood, as well as encouraging small business and self-employment, as key routes to economic recovery, are limited.
- More adequate incomes could be seen as the central aim in reviving local economies.
- 'Enterprise' and microfinance cannot be the new 'magic bullet' for poor areas.

#### **5. Reviving communities (chapter 6)**

##### ***Key questions:***

*6.1: is this the right vision for reviving communities?*

*6.2: are the proposed changes the right ones?*

*6.3: have important issues been missed?*

- Community self-help is neither a cure-all nor a panacea, and community participation should be seen as a means of calling decision-makers and service providers to account.
- The government's emphasis on joined-up government should include learning from the approaches of DFID and others involved in development to genuine participation.
- Participation needs to be a key element of neighbourhood strategies from the start.
- We would have welcomed more emphasis on capacity-building and participation.
- If they are increasingly involved in service provision, community and voluntary groups should still be able to maintain an independent voice.
- There needs to be a public debate on the relationship between community representatives and councillors, and participative and representative democracy.
- There should be further consideration of lessons learned from decentralisation of council services and tenants' participation.
- Exchanges between areas should not be limited to community leaders, or to the UK alone, or to building capacity in task management, but broadened in content and scope.
- Any neighbourhood level action should take account of divisions within communities.
- Local data should be disaggregated by gender, age and disability, as well as ethnicity.
- The increasingly punitive regime towards 'anti-social behaviour' is creating a new excluded category.
- More creative neighbourhood roles for local people should be considered.
- Training for professionals and service providers in new ways of working is crucial, including the basic principles of gender (and other social relations) analysis.

## **6. Gender**

- All the elements of the framework should be based on an analysis of gender relations.
- The final report should consider men's and women's different relationship to private and public space within estates. Local agencies should ensure women feel able to raise issues specific to women, and explore ways of involving men in community activity.
- The Women's Unit should be asked for observations on the report's proposals.
- Women will need leadership training; men and women will need advocacy training.

## **7. International examples and approaches from the development field (Annex G)**

- There could be a more in-depth analysis of the why and how of the casestudies used.
- There is great scope for constructive exchange of learning between north and south.
- One lesson is that setting up new structures also requires changes in ways of working and shifts in the distribution of power in order to result in the desired outcomes.
- Many UK organisations are engaged in adapting lessons from overseas to their work.

## **8. Conclusions**

- Neighbourhood renewal and community participation are not separate from a national strategy to combat poverty and social exclusion, but an integral element of it.
- The final report could include recommendations about developing national and regional policies in certain directions in order for neighbourhood renewal to succeed.

# National strategy for neighbourhood renewal: A framework for consultation

## 1. Introduction

- 1.1 Oxfam was established in 1942 as the Oxford Committee for Famine Relief. Since the 1960s, Oxfam has been involved in social development and humanitarian relief overseas. In recent years, the advocacy and campaigning elements of Oxfam GB's work have become increasingly important – drawing the lessons from programmes to try to influence wider policy issues. Oxfam GB now works in over 70 countries world-wide, and is a member of Oxfam International, a 'family' of independent organisations with a global presence.
- 1.2 In mid-1995, Oxfam GB's trustees decided to develop an anti-poverty programme in the UK, building on an existing discretionary programme which gave small grants to local organisations working on poverty issues in and around Oxford. The UK Poverty Programme was developed in response to concerns amongst Oxfam GB's staff, trustees, volunteers and especially overseas partners that it should begin to address poverty 'at home' in a more systematic way. In part, this was because of the sharp increase in poverty and inequality in the UK. In part, Oxfam believed that in order to be working on poverty world-wide, it needed to include domestic poverty as an integral part of both its strategic analysis and its programme and policy work. After extensive consultation, the UK Poverty Programme was launched, with the aim of 'adding value' both to existing anti-poverty work by UK-based organisations and to Oxfam GB's own international work. The overall purpose of the UK Poverty Programme is to have a direct impact on poverty and social exclusion in the UK, by strengthening the skills and capacity of the community and voluntary sector to tackle poverty more effectively, and by direct lobbying and campaigning based on Oxfam GB's domestic and international programme experience.<sup>1</sup>
- 1.3 In both its international and its UK programmes, Oxfam works in alliance with partner organisations in long-term development and anti-poverty work with community groups and people in poverty. A large part of Oxfam's programme is based on supporting grassroots organisations to make demands on local and national government. It has developed a body of expertise and experience on participative methods of working, gender analysis, capacity-building and analysis of 'what works' in community empowerment.
- 1.4 As part of its UK Poverty Programme activities, Oxfam is currently actively involved as a member of the UK Coalition against Poverty in Voices for Change, a two-year, UK-wide consultation of people living in poverty and marginalised communities to investigate barriers which prevent them participating in decision-making processes that affect their lives; a Commission of Inquiry, set up as part of this process, and made up of grassroots representatives and individuals from public life, is now considering the evidence emerging from the Voices for Change consultation and elsewhere, before drawing up a report recommending ways to overcome these barriers to participation.

- 1.5 Oxfam has also been involved with partner organisations working with local communities in the UK in participatory ways. In Glasgow, we have worked with East End Health Action on ways of addressing health needs in a very disadvantaged area; with Sustain, we have worked on innovative methods of involving local communities in food mapping, defining problems to do with access to food and proposing solutions; and in the north of England, we are working with a local authority to experiment with a participatory approach to the involvement of local communities in the New Deal for Communities.
- 1.6 We see these projects, and Oxfam's broader work in the UK and elsewhere, as being of key relevance to the National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal (NSNR). Oxfam therefore warmly welcomes the consultative process on the NSNR, and the opportunity to give its own contribution to this consultation.

## 2. Overview

- 2.1 Oxfam GB congratulates the Social Exclusion Unit on the publication of the NSNR report, and in particular on the process leading up to and following it. The production of a preliminary report, in 1998;<sup>ii</sup> ; the setting up of policy action teams, which have involved many experts from outside government; the enormous amount of research and investigation of practical evidence which have gone into the report; and the current consultation process, both oral and written, on the report itself, are exemplary. It is interesting to contemplate what an equivalent process for the government's recent poverty audit, *Opportunity for All*, might have produced.
- 2.2 The NSNR is also a further endorsement of the importance of listening to the 'voice of the poor', which Oxfam welcomes. There is an increasing recognition, both within government and more broadly, of the importance of ensuring the active involvement of local communities in projects and policies affecting them. This is apparent in statements made by individual government ministers. For example, David Blunkett, Secretary of State for Education and Employment, said in a recent speech:

'in building the capacity to regenerate confidence in providing social renewal, and in ensuring economic regeneration and employment, it must be the community itself that determines the direction' (9 May 2000).

In addition, recent national and local/area initiatives – such as the Single Regeneration Budget and the New Deal for Communities – have increasingly required the active involvement of the community as a condition for funding. **Oxfam welcomes this growing recognition of the right of those living in poor communities to have a say in shaping the decisions affecting their lives** – both because it is right in principle, and because we believe it is key to better quality policies and practices. (See section 5. below.)

- 2.3 In addition, the NSNR is scrupulous in its use of language, with the Social Exclusion Unit no longer using the unfortunate phrase 'worst estates' which dogged the early days of recent debates on neighbourhood renewal strategies. Since many inhabitants of disadvantaged neighbourhoods say that the problems they face are exacerbated by labels imposed on them by others, **Oxfam believes it is essential for those involved**

**in these debates to exercise great care in their use of language and imagery.** This need not involve downplaying the scale of the problems facing people living in poor areas, or exaggerating the capacities of areas with few resources at their disposal. There could be more attention given in the final report to the role of the local media. Negative local coverage can have a dramatic impact on how particular areas are seen, which can quickly feed a downward spiral of the kind the report identifies. Conversely, there is much that local media could do to build up areas, combat harassment, reduce social tensions, generate community activity and put people and groups in touch with one another.

2.4 In this response, we :

- set out some general comments on the **focus and framework** of the report;
- focus on those chapters of the report to which Oxfam’s programme experience, both in the UK and overseas, is most relevant: the economy and employment (**chapter 5**) and community participation (**chapter 6**); and
- comment on two areas of concern which are key to our own analysis and work, but which are not the subjects of specific chapters in the report: **gender** issues; and the positive potential contribution of **approaches and practices from the development field** (see Annex G of the report).
- We concentrate on the more general questions which are asked of respondents, rather than on issues of implementation. In addition, many of the detailed recommendations in other chapters go beyond Oxfam’s specific areas of expertise, and we therefore do not comment on them.

### 3. **The focus and framework of the report**

3.1 The report makes clear that the neighbourhood renewal strategy should be seen in the context of other government policies. In addition, we recognise that the NSNR could not cover all areas of policy relevant to the lives of people living in poor areas. However, the need for the government to draw up a comprehensive national anti-poverty strategy in conjunction with people in poverty and their organisations – as promised in the commitment entered into by the previous administration at the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen in 1995 – is thrown into sharp relief by the publication of this report. In its recent report-back to the United Nations on progress in relation to the commitments entered into at the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen, the government stated:

‘The active participation of poor people themselves is essential to effective anti-poverty strategies and programmes, and this will not happen unless such activities reflect their understandings and priorities.’

*(UK National Report: Implementation of the Copenhagen Declaration and Programme of Action, 1999, p. 61)*

However, this statement was made in Part II of the document, the section on international implementation. **We recommend that the government carries through the consultative approach to the NSNR into policy-making in other areas, and further develops it into a more participatory approach involving all relevant stakeholders.**

- 3.2 The impact of the government's policies on (for example) welfare reform will be critical, in terms of the ability of people living in poor areas to take advantage of any opportunities made available as a result of a national strategy for neighbourhood renewal. Research has demonstrated that increased insecurity and hardship can undermine the commitment needed to take the risk of entering employment. In addition, if the government is seen to be breaking the implicit contract it has with the population on welfare provision (as has recently seemed to be the case on pensions, for example), it is less likely to be trusted in other policy areas such as neighbourhood renewal. The emphasis on individual responsibilities/duties in the government's approach, which can translate into coercive policies in some areas, could undercut attempts to involve and empower local people, particularly in those neighbourhoods where it is more difficult to see the additional opportunities which the government sees as the other side of this new 'contract'. **The government should therefore consider carefully the potential, and cumulative, impact of all its existing policies on people living in disadvantaged areas - not only for its own sake, but also in order to ensure the success of the neighbourhood renewal strategy.**
- 3.3 The NSNR appears to mark a shift of emphasis away from a specific focus on area-based regeneration strategies towards a recognition of the centrality of mainstream core service provision to people living in disadvantaged areas:

‘.... deprivation on this scale is not going to be tackled by isolated short-term spending programmes that can only ever address a handful of places.’

(Moira Wallace, Social Exclusion Unit, *Housing Today*,  
13 April 2000)

In part, this may be a response to a recent report<sup>iii</sup> about the problems created by the plethora of different area-focused initiatives. In part, it may be due to a growing recognition that the roots of social exclusion lie largely in the decisions and priorities of national and transnational bodies, including the government. Oxfam welcomes this shift. Our experience (both overseas and in the UK) shows that community capacity-building and empowerment are crucial to increase the capability of poor individuals and communities to withstand external shocks; but also that it is crucial to ensure that national policies and services are designed to be ‘pro-poor’. **We recommend that the government develop mechanisms to ensure that all new policies are subject to prior assessment, to gauge any potential negative impact on groups living in poverty, and to ensure that they are oriented to reducing poverty, social exclusion and inequalities.**

- 3.4 One challenge of such a shift in emphasis, however, is to incorporate the current stress on community involvement within regeneration programmes into the new approach. Within the report, there are repeated references to involving users and residents, but very little information on how they might be involved in, for example, the design of service provision; this key element needs to be built into the change in direction for the NSNR. And Oxfam would argue for **adding to the four key outcomes (in jobs, education, crime and health) an additional criterion for success, in terms of community capacity-building.** More radically, there is currently no suggestion that the overall policy priorities and targets for core services involved in neighbourhood renewal could be drawn up in conjunction with people in the communities most



affected by them. From the experience of Oxfam's project partners overseas, it is possible to **involve people living in poverty in a participatory way, at all levels of governance and in all stages of planning, in determining the direction of strategies to tackle poverty and disadvantage, including setting priorities and measures of success.** We should be very willing to work with the government in order to develop such possibilities in the UK.

- 3.5 Despite the analytical focus on the ward as the key unit in the NSNR report, there is no structured debate within the report about the most effective unit of intervention. The Performance and Innovation Unit's report highlighted the confusion and overlaps that could be created by different units of operation in different departments' area-based innovatory strategies (such as zones in education, employment and health).<sup>iv</sup> **We recommend that the final version of the neighbourhood renewal strategy should include a structured discussion on the most effective unit of intervention to achieve policy and practice change in disadvantaged areas.**
- 3.6 The shift towards core service provision underpins the argument for including other policy areas which are at present omitted from the report. Given the crucial importance (both positive and negative) of security and adequacy of income to people living in disadvantaged areas, for example, it seems odd not to mention social security benefits at all, except in the context of strategies to assist in the move from welfare to work and to make work pay. Given the disproportionate impact of pollution and other environmental 'bads' on poor areas, it also seems odd to omit policies on the environment from consideration. **We recommend that the final report should include some consideration of all those policy areas which impact on the lives of people in disadvantaged areas, including social security and the environment.**
- 3.7 We welcome the acknowledgement within the report that inadequate resources are sometimes at the core of the problems faced by mainstream services within disadvantaged neighbourhoods. However, the public, in the consultation on services reported, appeared to rate this as a central concern (alongside the attitudes of staff). This suggests that the outcome of the public spending review in the summer will be critical to the success of the neighbourhood renewal strategy, as the Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and the Regions recognised; **adequate funding levels will be crucial.** In particular, the report recommends that core public services should be judged on meeting minimum standards within poor areas; but it is not yet clear whether the original funding formula will be fairer, or what will happen if the local services do not meet these standards. **If resources are to be withdrawn for under-performance, this will exacerbate the problems of service users in poor areas.** This issue is particularly important, given that there is not really a clear pointer within the report about how disadvantaged areas may be defined.
- 3.8 We welcome the focus on ethnic minority groups and their organisations, and the publication of the separate report on minority ethnic issues in social exclusion and neighbourhood renewal.<sup>v</sup> But the only group for which a national policy focus, outside the area frame, is proposed is young people; there is also a case for **seeing policies for other groups from a broader perspective, rather than solely from the perspective of neighbourhood renewal - and ultimately for giving serious consideration to the possible integration of the neighbourhood renewal strategy with a national anti-poverty strategy.**

- 3.9 Asylum-seekers may well see themselves as members of different ‘communities’ from the geographical ones which are those primarily addressed in the report. Moreover, with the government’s new policy on dispersal of asylum-seekers around the country, there is also a case for specific consideration of asylum-seekers’ needs within any national neighbourhood renewal strategy. Indeed, the dispersal strategy could be cited as a casestudy of how not to work with local communities. There is poor information about the needs of asylum-seekers; inadequate services; language barriers; poor staff awareness of the issues and needs involved; lack of local strategies between agencies; private sector landlords not consulting with local authorities; lack of resources etc. **We recommend that serious consideration is given to securing the rights of asylum-seekers living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods as part of the neighbourhood renewal strategy.**
- 3.10 The comprehensive scope of the report and its thorough treatment of its subject are to be welcomed. Through our work in disadvantaged neighbourhoods in the UK, Oxfam is aware of a **lack of trust in local and national politicians**, and a level of alienation from the decision-making process which amounts to cynicism in many disadvantaged areas, **that will require a large-scale investment of time, resources and good faith to overcome.** This report marks the beginning of such a process. But the commitment needed should not be under-estimated.
- 3.11 The NSNR includes what it calls ‘principles’ for neighbourhood renewal. But these are not really principles as such, but prioritised areas for action. It would be helpful, however, to **develop core principles for policy and practice at neighbourhood level.** This could be one way, for example, to take up concerns about the attitudes of public sector staff (demonstrated in the research cited in the report). **The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry has made racism within institutions unacceptable; the same needs to be achieved for prejudiced attitudes of public and private sector staff towards people in poverty.**
- 3.12 The discussion of targets in Annex C is rather limited at present. The final report should include **more detailed suggestions on how to prioritise between targets, and information on links to other relevant indicators the government is already committed to publishing.**

#### 4. Reviving local economies (chapter 5)

##### *Key questions considered:*

- 5.1 *Is this the right vision for reviving the economies of deprived neighbourhoods?*  
 5.2 *Are the proposed changes the right ones?*  
 5.3 *Have important issues been missed?*

- 4.1 It is significant that the report says clearly that economic and employment problems were usually the primary cause of disadvantaged areas’ decline. The Town and Country Planning Association has recently criticised the interim report of the Urban Taskforce<sup>vi</sup> for ignoring employment issues (*Financial Times*, 30 November 1999). **This policy area could have been given greater weight in the report.**

- 4.2 The shift towards more emphasis on mainstream, national policies and provision is perhaps less apparent in the chapter on reviving local economies than elsewhere. But national (and European Union, and global) developments probably have more impact in the economic and employment area than any other:

‘Area-based deprivation is rarely generated locally, but is typically a spatial manifestation of large-scale economic and demographic processes – processes that are likely to be responsive in a sustained way only to strategic, often national, policies.’

(Fran Bennett and Robert Walker,  
*Working with Work: An initial assessment of welfare to work*,  
Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 1998).

The final report **could consider in more detail the macro-economic policies at national, European and global level which would be needed to ensure stable investment in disadvantaged communities to create sustainable, secure employment.**

- 4.3 It could also be argued that some of the policy solutions proposed in the report do not measure up to the power of its analysis. For example, the report suggests that a ministerial ‘champion’ for corporate social responsibility be appointed within the Department of Transport and Industry; yet the government recently confirmed that its company law reforms will not include measures to ensure companies pay more attention to wider ‘stakeholder’ interests, potentially including those of poor communities.<sup>vii</sup> In addition, whilst much can be done in terms of employment at a local level,

‘.... the ground gained through local employment initiatives can be difficult to hold when broader policies take a contrary direction.’

(*Foundations 588*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 1998.)

It is therefore critical that the government’s wider regional and national employment and economic development policies support neighbourhood strategies. **A review of the current remit for the regional development agencies – which emphasises the stimulation of economic growth and employment, but underplays the importance of tackling regional inequalities – could be a key factor in their success.**

- 4.4 However, this is a policy area in which the characteristics of local neighbourhoods can also be crucial. Oxfam’s recent experience in its UK Poverty Programme, for example, suggests that some rural areas are under particular economic pressure at the moment, and face an uncertain future. Yet the implicit context of the report, and the area of debate and policy to which it is most relevant, is *urban* regeneration, and the report itself does not appear to question this focus. It is likely that **rather different strategies for economic and employment revival may be required in disadvantaged rural areas, often with ‘hidden’ poverty**, from those put forward here. This example also raises the important issue of **the need for an ‘early warning’ system, so that potential economic and employment problems may be prevented from causing area decline in the future; there could be more emphasis overall on strategies for prevention.**

- 4.5 The Treasury has recently concluded that vacancies now roughly match the numbers of unemployed people - and that even those jobless people living in disadvantaged areas live within reach of job vacancies.<sup>viii</sup> This analysis lies at the heart of the emphasis in both national and local employment policy on supply-side measures, including skills acquisition and help in jobsearch techniques. However, it is a contested analysis, which some commentators suggest places undue faith in the vacancy statistics as a real measure of job availability, and **underplays both the spatial concentration of worklessness and the barriers to mobility for jobseekers in some areas.** (If taken to extremes, it could suggest that area regeneration, at least from the point of view of employment strategies, is not needed.) **The Treasury report, however, does point to the importance of transport for people's ability to take up work opportunities outside the area, as well as for access to services.**
- 4.6 The withdrawal of private sector businesses from poorer areas is a clear cause of their further spiral into decline. The report calls on the voluntary and the private sector to participate in and support the neighbourhood renewal strategy. But it is less clear about how they may be persuaded to do so – or, more generally, about how to keep jobs in poor communities. Oxfam's recent experience in the UK suggests that **whilst many area-based partnerships currently fail to get business 'on board', others may be dominated by business interests; neither of these situations is satisfactory.** A recent report by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation suggested that survey data indicated that only 13 per cent of local authorities have used local planning agreements in relation to employment and/or training matters; this is fewer than 1 per cent of all agreements created each year.<sup>ix</sup> Yet, although the report discusses the new concept of 'community plans', it does not examine the potential of the more traditional planning/development agreements. **We recommend that more consideration is given to the potential of using more systematically compulsion and/or incentives for more intensive and sustainable employment creation in poor areas.**
- 4.7 The recent – rather speedy - inquiry by Lord Grabiner into benefit and tax fraud has resulted in some positive proposals, including the offer of a confidential help-line to give advice on how to enter the formal from the informal economy. However, Oxfam's recent experience overseas would suggest that the UK could learn valuable lessons from other countries in this policy area. Elsewhere, a largely negative attitude towards informal employment has been transformed more recently into a **greater understanding and respect for the survival strategies of people on the margins of the formal employment sector;** policies are then developed which build on the strengths of such coping strategies. Again, Oxfam would be very willing to share this experience, and to suggest ways in which such measures might be adapted to be of relevance within the UK context.
- 4.8 Within the report, there is an emphasis on keeping money within the neighbourhood. This aim can be related more closely to the goal of increasing employment. Many people who currently work in disadvantaged areas take themselves, and their resources, out of the area they work in in the evening. Oxfam would question whether the private sector (or indeed the voluntary sector) will deliver services in a better way to disadvantaged areas. But we would suggest that if the private sector is to tender for services, **the 'best value' regime for local authorities should take levels of local employment as one of the criteria for assessment.** Another possible

option is to expand the intermediate employment, or social economy, sector of small community businesses to carry out functions which would meet local needs which are currently not being met – although this is likely to need access to additional funding to ensure long-term viability.

**4.9** However, Oxfam’s experience would also suggest that there are **real limits to the strategies of keeping money within the neighbourhood, as well as encouraging small businesses and self-employment, as key routes to higher employment and economic recovery in disadvantaged areas.** A strategy to keep more money in the neighbourhood can underestimate the importance of how much money enters the community in the first place (in particular, via an adequate level of social security benefits); local consultations have suggested that higher weekly benefit levels is one of the top priorities of those living in poor areas. Indeed, it could be argued that **more adequate incomes, rather than more jobs, should be the central aim in reviving local economies.** This is a particularly relevant issue for poorer areas, as research has shown that there is a more pronounced local and regional pattern of non-employment than of unemployment by itself.<sup>x</sup> Whatever the success of current government efforts to redirect almost everyone of working age towards employment, a disproportionate share of non-employment is likely to continue to be located in disadvantaged areas. This issue is not addressed in the report.

**4.10** In addition, **encouraging ‘enterprise’ can only ever address part of the agenda necessary to create a sufficient quantity of quality jobs in poor areas.** The report suggests that self-employment should be ‘pushed harder’; but the Joseph Rowntree Foundation’s Inquiry into Income and Wealth in the mid 1990s<sup>xi</sup> found that, in addition to high incomes, self-employment often resulted in very low and insecure (and occasionally negative) incomes – now often subsidised through the working families tax credit. The focus on enterprise as a route out of poverty was examined, and found wanting, in a publication on microfinance published jointly in 1999 by Oxfam and the New Economics Foundation.<sup>xii</sup> In this publication, it was argued that the success of any loans to small enterprise

‘... is directly proportional to the starting point of the borrower. In other words, the less poor the borrower, the more he or she can benefit in terms of income from such loans’ (p. 135).

**Microfinance - including credit unions - should not be seen as the new ‘magic bullet’ to solve the problems of poor areas.**

## **5. Reviving communities (chapter 6)**

(note: some points made in this section are also relevant to **chapter 7: Decent Services** and **chapter 8: Leadership and Joint Working**)

### ***Key questions considered:***

*6.1 Is this the right vision for reviving communities?*

*6.2 Are the proposed changes the right ones?*

*6.3 Have important issues been missed?*

5.1 Oxfam responded in some detail to the report of Policy Action Team 9 on community self-help; we will not repeat all the points made in that response in this one. Oxfam welcomed in that report the value placed on sustainable community development (which we see as a broader concept than ‘community self-help’), and the recognition given to both the time and the resources necessary to nurture and support it. We also welcomed the acknowledgement that community self-help is neither a cure-all nor a panacea, and should not be allowed to let service providers off the hook – indeed, that **community participation can be seen as a means of calling decision-makers and service providers to account**. Oxfam stated its view that community involvement should not supplement or substitute for inadequate service provision, or democratic deficits in the political process, but work for changes in both. We welcome the NSNR report’s focus on the importance of the community’s own perspective. However, we believe that **the report could have built on PAT 9’s recommendations, and gone further than it appears to have done**.

5.2 In the House of Commons, Mo Mowlam MP (Minister for the Cabinet Office) said recently:

‘I firmly believe that there must be a buy-in from the community if these [neighbourhood renewal] programmes are to work.’

(House of Commons *Hansard*, 10 May 2000, col. 829)

We welcome ministerial statements such as this, and the report’s recognition that ‘clear local ownership of priorities is crucial to success’. However, to limit the rationale for community participation to this rather instrumentalist approach would be too narrow. The Department for International Development (DFID) has recently published a consultation document on the human rights of people living in poverty. In that document,<sup>xiii</sup> it is recognised that strategies to tackle poverty will not succeed unless people experiencing poverty engage in the decisions and processes which affect their lives. But **participation is also seen as their fundamental human right**. The three **key features necessary for participation to be genuine are that it should be inclusive – reaching out to those voices which are usually not heard – and that something should change as a result – that the authorities should be held to account**. The right to information for those taking part in such processes is also described as critical. Without these factors being taken seriously, participation may just become an ‘echo’ for those in power, reflecting their own priorities back to them; and if this occurs regularly and systematically, the cynicism of people living in poor areas, and their alienation from politicians and policy and political processes, will only increase. Capacity-building at community level must be about supporting people to help them identify the constraints they experience in fulfilling their basic rights and find appropriate ways to strengthen their ability to overcome them. **The current government’s emphasis on ‘joined-up government’ should therefore include learning from these approaches of DFID and others involved in development**.

5.3 Moreover, Oxfam’s own approach would also emphasise the role of local people in influencing the broader policies and practices which are implicated in their poverty and marginalisation. In order to do this, **participation needs to be a key element of neighbourhood strategies from the beginning – from the design of such strategies through to implementation, monitoring and evaluation**. PAT 9’s report said that community self-help was about ‘communities shaping their own destiny’, with a good

community being one which ‘has a strong voice in decisions which affect its interests’. This kind of statement is now commonplace amongst practitioners involved in regeneration, and is increasingly supported by ministers and others (as shown above). But it is perhaps less common in the policy areas which the report sees as more important to those living in poor areas - ie mainstream provision of core services. And **the implications of taking genuine participation seriously are more significant than is recognised in the report**, and perhaps suggest a different frame of reference. We explore some of these implications below.

- 5.4 We recognise that the section of the report on ‘reviving communities’ is broader than the remit of PAT 9. **However, we would have welcomed a stronger emphasis on community capacity-building and participation in the report as a whole.** In Oxfam’s response to the PAT 9 report, we warned against the danger of diminished service provision in active communities, and an over-emphasis on community and voluntary organisations (especially staffed by unpaid volunteers) substituting for services provided to recognised standards by paid staff. In particular, we warned that in such cases the burden of unpaid work is likely to fall in particular on women within the community. The neighbourhood renewal report does not entirely escape this trap, when it talks of involving community and voluntary sector organisations in service delivery. We would want to be certain that **community and voluntary groups could maintain an independent voice if they were increasingly involved in service provision.** (There may be a distinction between community and voluntary groups; there can be significant differences between small community groups and the local outposts of larger, often national, ‘voluntary sector’ organisations.)
- 5.5 In some areas, recent elections for community representatives to help direct the delivery of New Deal for Communities initiatives, or local authority service provision, have seen higher turnouts than local elections for councillors. With the advent of local government reform, including the concept of ‘community councillors’, there are some important debates to be conducted, including **more exploration of the relationship between community representatives and councillors, and more generally between participative and representative democracy.** The report does not really enter into such debates, but takes a more ‘managerialist’ approach, putting forward the tiered proposals of neighbourhood management, local strategic partnerships and a national centre for neighbourhood renewal. However, whilst community representatives may be seen as advocates, or as connecting with a different but valuable kind of expertise (rather than ‘representatives’ in the more traditional sense of elected spokespersons), there nonetheless needs to be **some discussion of how they are selected, and how they might be accountable and feed back to their communities;** otherwise, the danger is that the more powerful partners in (eg) local strategic partnerships control both these aspects, and/or that divisions within communities are merely reproduced.
- 5.6 Conversely, care needs to be taken that **local authorities are not overloaded with the task of managing multiple partnerships,** with the danger of a loss of overall strategic direction. In addition, much of Oxfam’s recent experience in the UK would suggest that current partnerships in urban regeneration are often council-led, with minimal or tokenistic resident involvement. There is little discussion in the report, either, of the experience of decentralising council services from the 1970s/80s, which contained valuable lessons. In addition, there is little mention of tenants’

organisations, or the lessons to be learned from current arrangements for tenant participation, and no discussion of how the proposed national centre for neighbourhood renewal would relate to the existing national tenants' resource centre. **We recommend that before the final report is drawn up, further consideration is given to the lessons learned from recent experience of decentralisation of council services and tenants' participation.**

5.7 In a recent speech, the Secretary of State for Education and Employment said:

‘... we have agreed to fund community consultants. This will mean local activists ... being able to provide advice on community plans, educational programmes, and direct hands on help, to other communities around the country.’

(David Blunkett MP, speech, 9 May 2000).

He was referring to the Community Champions Fund, which is also mentioned in the report. Oxfam would suggest that in order to maximise the potential input from community participation, **the government could build on the report's welcome idea that 'community leaders' in different places should be able to learn from one another.** In Scotland, for example, a network of community groups has been set up to feed back its views to the Scottish Executive and Parliament on the impact of policies to tackle poverty and social exclusion; this infrastructure could be mirrored in England. The national centre for neighbourhood renewal could be used to host exchanges between broader-based community groups (rather than just 'community leaders'), and to encourage more sustained links between them. Peer support and networking is a community activity in itself. It is crucial for the confidence and strength of marginalised communities to realise that they share similar problems with others, and to exchange ideas about solutions. We would also want to **ensure that this idea was not limited only to exchanges across the UK** (including Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, as well as different areas of England). Many community groups have already found it valuable to exchange ideas with partner organisations in European Union schemes. In addition, however, Oxfam GB knows from experience the value of community activists in developed and developing countries learning from one another, and hope that **the possibility of facilitating north/south learning of this kind could be included in the recommendations in the final report.**

5.8 In addition, the content of the exchanges could usefully be extended. In particular, this could form the basis of informed and ongoing dialogue with community representatives on the priorities, design, indicators of success and feedback on performance for the national framework for neighbourhood renewal. Moreover, part of the function of such exchanges is to help build the critical capacity of community groups, rather than just their task management capacity. (This is the only way, in fact, to bring about the 'civic renewal' which the Secretary of State cited in a recent speech as the positive outcome of people's increased participation in participative as well as representative democracy.) This proposal would overcome the tendency - exhibited in this report, but also more widely by the government - to relate 'local people's' understanding to the local alone, and to ignore the positive contribution which those living in poor areas or in poverty could make to national level policy debates. The report is about a national strategy (albeit limited to England, and related to neighbourhood level policies and practices); but the concept and practice of



partnerships are restricted to the local level, and even the references to linking with regional strategies and priorities are not very worked through. **We recommend that the exchanges and activities envisaged in the report be broadened in content and scope.**

- 5.9** There could also be more emphasis on the reality of divisions within communities, rather than just ‘anti-social behaviour’. We deal with the important issue of gender below. But more generally, in disadvantaged areas, as in any community, there are differences of power, and inequalities, and groups who are often excluded. Moreover, persistent poverty often has a fracturing impact on relationships and trust in local areas. **Any neighbourhood level action must take account of these divisions, and of the differential impact of local development on different groups of residents.** We welcome the reference in Annex C to targets, and the recognition of the difficulties involved in data collection at ward level and the need for key indicators of social exclusion. However, we would suggest that **it is essential that data are disaggregated as much as possible by gender, age and disability, as well as ethnicity. This will make tailoring strategies and directing resources to particular groups more practicable.**
- 5.10** We acknowledge the need to tackle ‘local threats’ as a basis for successful community development. However, we remain concerned that **the increasingly punitive regime towards ‘anti-social behaviour’** - which now apparently extends to include proposals for housing benefit cuts - **is creating a new excluded category.** We would also have wished to see **greater emphasis on more creative neighbourhood roles for local people**, such as ‘animateurs’ and detached youth workers etc., rather than limiting this to the appointment of neighbourhood wardens. However, the report could usefully have suggested, for example, ensuring that the proposed learning centres were located in ‘neutral’ territory; the organisers of the community centre may not always have the most inclusive attitudes towards other residents. One mark of a healthy area will be where people of all ages and ethnic origins, and men and women, are participating in community decision-making and debates.
- 5.11** Finally – and of particular relevance to chapters 7 and 8 – Oxfam welcomes the recognition that it is not only communities which need training and capacity-building. If services are to be delivered in a joined-up way in disadvantaged areas – and particularly if local people are to have a say in their design, targets and monitoring, as we would suggest – **the idea of training professionals and service providers in new ways of working is crucial.** The analysis in the report, moreover, mentions cross-professional training, and also training local authority and community members involved in partnerships together - but this idea is not carried forward into the proposals for action. **We recommend that local authority and community members involved in partnerships should be trained together, as well as separately,** and again would be pleased to pass on Oxfam’s experience from overseas in multi-disciplinary working. In addition, training for professionals and service providers in new ways of working should include learning the basic principles of gender (and other social relations) analysis, and the techniques used in equalities training. We welcome the reference to such training in Annex F, but hope that **in the final strategy, training of this nature will be given greater prominence as a recommendation.**

## 6. Gender

- 6.1 We welcome the fact that the Urban Forum, which is undertaking the consultation process on the draft framework for the NSNR on behalf of the Social Exclusion Unit, held a workshop on the NSNR and gender issues. In Oxfam's experience, any community intervention needs to start from a clear gender analysis and its implications for power structures and relationships within the community. Relationships within the household can affect participation in community activities (as well as the labour market); on the other hand, if community management is added to women's duties without other changes, this can merely result in women being overloaded, rather than increasing their influence. All these are powerful reasons why it is crucial to look at the differential impact of local factors and strategies for change on men and women. Oxfam has found this to be true within the UK as well as overseas.<sup>xiv</sup> (Indeed, the whole framework for consultation could incorporate a recognition of difference within communities more effectively, as noted in 5.8 above.) **All the elements of the framework – the analysis, the principles and the key ideas – should be based on an analysis of gender relations; and it should be recognised that all the policy and practice proposals will have an effect on gender relations, as well as on men and women separately.** (Of course, the impact of the measures proposed will also differ according to men's and women's race, age etc.)
- 6.2 Within the report, in contrast to ethnic minority groups (about whom a separate report was published, in addition to numerous references within the main report), there are very few references to gender as a key concept, or to women or men as different groups within communities. The references appear to be limited to: the access of women's organisations to funding; ensuring fair opportunities, including access to employment; and gender disaggregated statistics. However, this does not amount to using gender as a framework for analysis of communities and neighbourhood renewal, which Oxfam would argue from its experience is essential. **The final report should include a consideration of the different relationships which men and women can have to the private and public space within estates** (including domestic violence, one of the priorities of the Women's Unit) - which should influence the proposals for dealing with 'threats' as a secure basis for community participation.
- 6.3 Some commentators might argue that, because more women tend to be active within community groups, this is not an area in which their interests are under-represented. However, this view would be mistaken. Recent research has demonstrated that, just because women often form the majority of members of community groups, this does not result in them feeling they have the authority to raise issues specifically to do with women's poverty, rather than community issues more generally.<sup>xv</sup> **Local organisations need to ensure that women feel that raising issues specific to women is legitimate - and to explore ways to involve men positively in community activity alongside women.**
- 6.4 A central element of the remit of the Women's Unit is intended to be 'mainstreaming' gender awareness in other departments and areas of policy. It is sadly apparent from the NSNR report (as well as in other policy areas) that this process still has a long way to go. There is not even an annex within this report looking at its proposals from a gender perspective. Gender, as with other diversity issues, requires a proactive approach. At this stage, Oxfam would therefore suggest that **the Women's Unit, and**

**others with a gender perspective** - including those groups which work with men (as some of Oxfam's partner organisations within the UK do) - **should be asked for their analysis of the report, and their observations on the differential impact of its proposals on men and women.** Moreover, the Social Exclusion Unit could benefit from the work of the European Commission on gender mainstreaming – which is in any case mandatory for applications for regional funding in the UK, and should therefore be familiar to the government.

- 6.5 The consideration of leadership could be expanded to recognise that **women will need specific training in leadership**, to ensure that there is equal representation of both genders – and that both men's and women's views are represented at decision-making levels higher than that of the community or neighbourhood. **Training of both women and men in advocacy techniques will also be needed**, to ensure that they are fully equipped to engage with decision-makers in putting forward their communities' views.

## 7. **International examples and approaches from the development field (Annex G)**

- 7.1 We welcome the emphasis in the report on its proposals being evidence based and reality tested. The report includes Annex G, giving as evidence of 'what works' both domestic and international examples of best practice. However, whilst there are many examples from Europe, and in particular from the USA, the only casestudy from a 'southern' country is the (by now familiar) example of the Grameen Bank. There could also, we believe, have been a **more in-depth analysis of why and how each of the casestudies succeeded or failed**, both in their own terms and in the light of the principles set out in the report.
- 7.2 Whilst recognising the importance of context, and the dangers in merely 'transplanting' examples from one country to another, probably very different, one, Oxfam believes that there is **much more scope for constructive and valuable exchange of learning between countries in the north and south.** We have already alluded above to the approach taken by DFID towards the participation of people living in poverty in decision-making processes. Moreover, DFID seeks to consult with civil society actors in drawing up its country strategy papers; similarly, the participation of civil society is also being promoted as central to the development of poverty reduction strategy papers for countries benefitting from debt relief under the Highly Indebted Poor Countries initiative.
- 7.3 Of particular relevance to the analysis and proposals in the NSNR, perhaps, are the experiments in participatory budgeting, such as the one conducted, for almost two decades now, in Porto Alegre, in Brazil, and replicated in some eighty Brazilian municipalities. A proportion of the local authority's budget related to social investment is debated, and its allocation decided upon, by community groups and ultimately the community itself. The crucial element in the success of this experiment was a political will to devolve power. It took several years to build up real trust between the authority and the people, as their hopes had been betrayed so often in the past. Training was required by the local people, for which time and resources were allocated by the local authority (rather than just being left to the voluntary sector). And non-governmental organisations played the role of 'critical friend' to community

leaders and groups, helping them to build up their strength and confidence and to develop their skills in analysis and strategic decision-making, not just task delivery. One useful lesson from this experiment is that **setting up new structures also requires changes in ways of working and shifts in the distribution of power.** Without such developments, deliberately entered into, changes in structure may not result in the desired outcomes.

- 7.4 Moreover, this is not just a matter of looking at examples from overseas. Many **voluntary organisations and others in the UK are now actively engaged in adapting these methods to their own work.** Oxfam and the Community Pride Initiative, for example, are currently experimenting with engaging communities in participatory budgeting in the north of England. Participatory appraisal techniques, widely used with communities in southern countries to analyse the impact and causes of poverty (amongst other issues), have been used in the UK for ‘food mapping’ and for action on health issues within disadvantaged communities (see 1. above). Oxfam would be very willing to discuss the learning from these and other examples with the Social Exclusion Unit.

## 8. Conclusion

- 8.1 There is evidence that higher levels of ‘social capital’ contribute both to economic health and to social cohesion. There is also evidence that widening income inequality exaggerates status differentials and undermines communities of interest. We would emphasise, therefore, that **we do not see neighbourhood renewal and community participation as separate from a national strategy to combat poverty and social exclusion, but as an integral element of it.**
- 8.2 We are aware that some of the points made above refer to the need to make the connections with drivers of change and policies which originate not at neighbourhood level but at national, European or even global level. It could be argued that this is not the remit of the report. However, the ‘Copenhagen’ commitments entered into at the World Summit for Social Development in 1995 by the previous UK government provide a useful model here, as one of their purposes can be seen as listing the components of the ‘enabling framework’ which is considered necessary for the viability and success of a national strategy to combat poverty and achieve social development for the whole population. Rather than merely describing current government policies, therefore, the final NSNR report could usefully include **references to the need for national and regional policies to be developed in certain directions, in order that a neighbourhood renewal strategy might be successful.**

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## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> Oxfam Ireland is now a separate organisation, covering Northern Ireland and Éire. Whilst Oxfam Ireland does not at present have a domestic focus to its work, Oxfam GB is currently preparing to engage in some anti-poverty work in Northern Ireland in conjunction with Oxfam Ireland as part of its UK Poverty Programme.

<sup>ii</sup> Social Exclusion Unit, *Bringing Britain Together*, Cabinet Office, 1998.

<sup>iii</sup> Performance and Innovation Unit, *Reaching Out: The role of central government at regional and local level*, Cabinet Office, 2000.

<sup>iv</sup> See note <sup>iii</sup> above.

<sup>v</sup> Social Exclusion Unit, *Minority Ethnic Issues in Social Exclusion and Neighbourhood Renewal: A guide to the work of the Social Exclusion Unit and the Policy Action Teams so far*, 2000.

<sup>vi</sup> Urban Taskforce, *Urban Renaissance: Sharing the vision*, Department for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, 1999.

<sup>vii</sup> Stephen Byers MP, Trade and Industry Secretary, quoted in *Financial Times*, 7 June 2000.

<sup>viii</sup> HM Treasury, *The Goal of Full Employment: Employment Opportunity for All Throughout Britain: Trends in regional and local vacancies and unemployment*.

<sup>ix</sup> Richard Macfarlane, *Local Jobs from Local Development: The use of planning agreements to target training and employment outcomes*, York Publishing Services Ltd. for Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2000.

<sup>x</sup> Paul Gregg and Jonathan Wadsworth, *Unemployment and Non-Employment: Unpacking Economic Inactivity*, Employment Policy Institute, 1998.

<sup>xi</sup> Joseph Rowntree Foundation *Inquiry into Income and Wealth*, Volumes I and II, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 1995.

<sup>xii</sup> Ben Rogaly et al., *Poverty, Social Exclusion and Microfinance*, Oxfam/New Economics Foundation, 1999.

<sup>xiii</sup> *Strategies for Achieving the International Development Targets: Human rights for poor people - a consultation document*, Department for International Development, 2000.

<sup>xiv</sup> Nicky May, *Challenging Assumptions: The gender dimensions of urban regeneration*, Oxfam/Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

<sup>xv</sup> G Scott, G Long, U Brown and J McKenzie, *Women's Issues in Local Partnership Working*, Scottish Poverty Information Unit, Glasgow Caledonian University, 1999.

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