

Something for Nothing

Challenging negative attitudes to people living in poverty



Volunteer DJ 'JP' presents his regular show at the Oxfam-supported Sunny Govan community radio station in Glasgow. 'Sunny G' gives local people a voice, helps volunteers gain skills and confidence, and challenges negative attitudes towards people living in poverty. © Andy Hall

People living in poverty in the UK make a vital contribution to the economy and society through unpaid caring and community work. But public attitudes prevail that people on low incomes – and particularly those on benefits – are 'scroungers' who are to blame for their own poverty. These attitudes are exacerbated by a widespread misbelief that opportunities to earn a reasonable income are readily available.

***Something for Nothing* highlights the positive contribution made by people on low incomes, and explores the barriers which prevent many people from moving out of benefits and into employment. In doing so, we hope to encourage positive attitudes towards people in poverty; and to contribute to the creation of a climate which supports the bold policy measures needed to end UK poverty.**

Summary

'I think the press do absolutely disgusting things to people on benefits. You never hear of any good things – it's all "benefit fraud, scroungers." Yet you can go to any community in Britain and you'll find people on benefits doing great work, helping people in their community. I'd like to see people on benefits recognised for the good things they do.'

Ian, volunteer, Anti-Poverty Network Cymru

'Everybody has a crisis in their life at some point, and nobody should be judged by taking something back. A lot of us put a lot more back into the country... with our voluntary work, with our ordinary work, than the government realises.'

Carole, advice centre worker, Oxford

'The government doesn't appreciate the time we put in. They always talk about bad people in our communities, but I don't think they appreciate the good.'

Constance, volunteer, Cardiff

'I don't regret it – I do it because I love them. But if you think about it – I get £29 a week. That's £4 a day. And I'm basically on duty 24 hours a day. If he's up all night with his asthma, I'm up with him. It's 17p an hour.'

Joan, carer, London

More than 13 million people in the UK are living in poverty.¹ Oxfam believes it is morally wrong that, in a rich nation, millions of people are struggling to get by day to day.

People experiencing poverty in the UK deserve the understanding and support of the public, the media and government. In reality, damaging negative attitudes and beliefs about people in poverty prevail. This isn't only alienating and demoralising for the individuals concerned – it poses a very real barrier to ending poverty in the UK. As long as more than a quarter of the British public think that people in poverty are to blame for their own poverty,² there will never be widespread public support for the policy measures needed to overcome poverty, such as increases in wage and benefit levels.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) report *Understanding attitudes to tackling economic inequality* explores the beliefs behind these factors – including the belief that there are adequate opportunities to earn a reasonable income, and the belief that benefit recipients do not, and will never, contribute back to society. It suggests that, 'an important route for challenging judgemental attitudes... would be to raise awareness of the barriers to opportunity faced by many people and to highlight the contributions that many of those on low incomes currently make to society and will make in future.'³

Something for Nothing attempts to do as the JRF report suggests. We highlight the nature and value of the positive contribution that people in poverty make to society and the economy through unpaid caring and community work; and explore the very real barriers which people on low incomes face to formal employment. Our recommendations call for politicians and the media to lead a sea change in public attitudes towards people living in poverty, by recognising and raising awareness of the fact that poverty is not the fault of the individual, and that many people living in poverty do make a significant contribution to society even if they are not in paid work.

Something for Nothing is based on, and gives voice to, ordinary people's experiences of what it's like to live in poverty, the barriers they face in taking up paid work, and the reasons why they are willing to care and volunteer despite the lack of support, recognition and reward.

The positive contribution made by people in poverty

1. Caring

Caring is probably the most obvious example of unpaid work that goes unacknowledged in national economic measures – both in terms of the value to the economy of the care provided for 'free' by women and men, and the personal cost to carers in lost income because caring stops them

doing paid, or better-paid, work.

'Everybody likes their independence and on this much money I don't have it. If someone had to come in to do what I do, they [the government] would have to pay them. And they'd pay them more than £50 a week.'

Eileen, carer, London

'The 11 years I looked after my parents I went through all my savings... [I] have been constantly trying to get back into a situation where I'm in a reasonable financial position.'

Robert, Thornaby

'I think Carer's Allowance being an add-on, and being so little, reflects the way that politicians see carers. They don't appreciate us at all... Being a carer and constantly having to knock on doors, having to fight for things you're entitled to – that's exhausting.'

Susan, carer, London

'I started doing it all [volunteering] because there was nothing on the estate before – and I loved to see the difference it made to people's lives. So many people have gone on to do further education, gain confidence, go on courses they'd never have thought of [doing] before. It's been great.'

Anne, volunteer, Llandudno.

People on low and even average incomes often care for adult relatives because they have no choice; they can't afford to pay for professional care services. People on low incomes are also more likely to have caring responsibilities, given the high rate of illness and disability among people living in poverty.^{4 5} Two-fifths of adults aged 45-64 on below-average incomes have a limiting, long-standing illness. This is more than twice the rate for those on above-average incomes.⁶

The most recent survey of unpaid caring estimated the value of unpaid care of adults in the UK at about £87bn per year.⁷ This figure was calculated by estimating the average hours of care provided per week by adults for adults in the UK (based on census data) and 'charging' it at a rate of £14.50 per hour – an amount based on the NHS's unit cost for adults receiving home care.

Caring for relatives has a significant impact on a person's ability to earn. A recent survey found that more than half of those who care have given up work to do so, 'while one in five have [had] to reduce the hours they worked'.⁸ The impact on earnings lasts well beyond the weeks, months, or years during which a person is caring. Using the 'lifecycle' approach to the gender pay gap, it is clear that caring may permanently impair a carer's ability to sustain herself and her family.⁹ Young adults who care often miss out on training and education opportunities, and are therefore more likely to end up in low-paid work or unemployed.

In short, many people care because they are poor, and stay poor because they care. Carer's Allowance is currently just £53.10 per week. And since it is only paid to those care for a minimum of 35 hours per week, it amounts to a wage of £1.52 per hour. Carer's Allowance is reduced pound for pound by the amount of certain other benefits – including state pension – making it impossible for carers to supplement their minimal income.¹⁰

Inadequate benefits, the lifetime impact of caring on carers' total income, and the combination of government pressure to work and its failure to understand the challenges of mixing work and caring, amount to structural discrimination against carers – people who are working extremely hard to both the economic and social benefit of the UK.

2. Building communities: volunteering and helping out

Less obvious than caring – and more difficult to quantify – is the massive contribution made by people living in poverty who give up their time to improve the lives of others in their communities.

The national performance indicator on volunteering developed by the Office of the Third Sector¹¹ only recognises *formal* volunteering – which it defines as 'giving unpaid help through groups, clubs or organisations which support social, environmental, cultural or sporting objectives'.¹² This narrow definition results in a lack of recognition of the unpaid community-building work that people in poverty in the UK do day to day. And this serves to reinforce the predominating negative social judgements of people on low incomes, particularly those on benefits.

'The amount of work I do a week varies. I could do five days a week but it could be as little as three. By doing voluntary work you're putting something back into the community. People might think we are benefit scroungers... it's a shame that people don't recognise that while we might not be doing permanent [paid] work, we are doing important voluntary work.'

Sandy, volunteer, Glasgow

'Hopefully this will lead to some employment because I really, really like it... it's given me tremendous self-confidence. There are thousands of volunteers doing an awful lot. Some places wouldn't survive without us.'

Sara, volunteer, Llandudno

'When I was volunteering I wasn't working – it was a case of, do I go out and get a job that I don't want? Or do I knuckle down and train and learn? It was every day, a six-day week, Monday to Saturday. I didn't get any benefits or income. A lot of people look down on volunteers, as opposed to thinking they're really valuable – we're doing jobs that need to be done.'

Terry, former volunteer, London

'The money I am on is not enough to live on. I'm doing 20 hours a week and I'm going up to 25 hours. I get tax credit, but because my hours are going up, everything extra I earn is taken off me in tax. I'm doing my extra five hours a week for £20 – and that's before tax. I think to myself, why?'

Stacy, Manchester

In fact, research has shown that there is more 'mutual aid' work done in low-income communities than in affluent communities. One survey of household work practices found 6.8 per cent of exchanges are unpaid in affluent suburbs against 15.6 per cent in lower-income neighbourhoods.¹³ This supports other indications that people on low incomes are more likely to be engaged in informal rather than formal volunteering.

Whether or not they call themselves volunteers (or fulfill the government criteria for a volunteer), people on low incomes who help others in their community, for no financial gain, play a vital role in the regeneration of some of the UK's most deprived areas and improve the lives of some of its most vulnerable people.

Given the economic and social value of this work to local communities – and the value of volunteering in terms of building an individual's skills and experience – it seems obvious that Jobcentres and welfare-to-work policies should encourage and enable volunteering, and view it as a step towards paid employment. In reality, there are many problems with the way that benefits and volunteering interact – or don't.

The regulations on volunteering while claiming benefits are not widely understood – by benefits advisors, claimants, or community organisations – nor applied consistently.¹⁴ As a result, many volunteers end up hiding their volunteering from the Jobcentre, or miss out on the opportunity of fixed-length volunteer placements for fear of losing their benefits. Although claimants lose nothing from their benefits if they claim only expenses, those who want to undertake part-time, temporary work of just a few hours a week, cannot do this and remain on benefits.

The current benefits system simply doesn't allow people to gain work experience and supplement their minimal income through short-term, low-paid work in their community. This and other weaknesses in the tax and benefits system mean that, for many people, moving from benefits into formal employment is not a viable proposition.

Barriers to work and opportunity

There is a widely-held assumption that, for those who want them, there are plenty of opportunities to get into employment, stay in employment, and earn a reasonable income from it.¹⁵ But in reality, the financial returns from work are negligible for large numbers of people. And in many cases, when the additional costs of work are taken into account, people actually lose out by working, or by working more hours.

Inadequate wages mean that half of all people living in poverty, live in working households. In spite of government subsidies to low wages through tax credits, a majority of both children and working-age adults in poverty actually live in working households – 55.3 per cent of children,¹⁶ and 52.9 per cent of adults.¹⁷ The proportion of people living in poverty who are in working households has been on an upward trend for over a decade now.

'Childcare is a big barrier. You are giving your child to a stranger and paying them a full-time wage to look after your kid, but if you are on the minimum wage the person looking after your kids is earning more than you. How do you work that one out?'

Anne-Marie, community worker, Glasgow

'I'm worse off now that I'm not on incapacity benefit. [Then] I got full housing benefit and only paid a nominal amount of council tax. [Now] when my wages go in it pays off my overdraft. I make sure the rent and the council tax are paid because I don't want to lose my home... and then I've got very little to live on. It's just a case of living from hand to mouth with me.'

Jim was on incapacity benefit for over 15 years following a serious accident at work.

'I wish I could work, but it's not worth me working at all. You don't get enough money and then you need childcare. I used to work. I was a cleaner but it wasn't worth it. I wasn't getting enough money to pay the debts or bills. Everything's gone up in price.'

Jackie, Thornaby

The nature of the modern labour market helps to exclude poor people systematically from the benefits of a rich society. A large number of jobs that are available – particularly in poor areas – are low-paid, short-term, part-time, unreliable or insecure.

The benefit system, meanwhile, takes full-time, stable employment to be the opposite of being on benefits; it is systemically incapable of coping with the nature of the modern labour market. In terms of structure, these failings fall into two main categories: the very high marginal tax rates faced by a lot of people on low incomes, and the failure of the benefit system to recognise and act upon the importance to people of security of income.

Millions of people in the UK have levels of income which require their budgeting decisions to be calculated with precision; and as a result, their lives and livelihoods can be thrown off course by sudden changes to their incomes, even if these changes are short-lived. This has meant that traditional 'better off in work' calculations miss out a key consideration – what in Oxfam's work around the world is known as the 'vulnerability context'. An understanding of the importance of non-financial assets in enabling people to cope in their day-to-day lives, as well as in emergencies, helps to show why people might – quite rationally – not be willing to put other assets at risk for sake of increasing their financial assets.

Benefit levels are very low – and have been deliberately run down compared with wages over the past 30 years in order to make them more and more difficult to live on. But they afford people a *stability* of income that the modern labour market increasingly denies them.

Conclusion and recommendations

Negative attitudes towards people living in poverty are widespread, and have a damaging impact both on the individuals concerned and on public policy-making to tackle poverty. At the root of these attitudes are the beliefs that poverty is the fault of the individual, that people on benefits could get jobs if they wanted to, and that those who are not in paid work do not and will never contribute anything back to society.

Something for Nothing shows that these beliefs are unfounded and unfair. We do so by highlighting the contribution made by people living in poverty (including those on benefits) through caring and community work; and by raising awareness of the barriers posed by the current tax and benefits system which prevent many people in poverty from taking on formal employment, reaching their potential, or being rewarded for the contribution which they may already make.

We hope this 'evidence' will contribute to the current debate on public attitudes in which many NGOs, community groups and poverty activists are participating. And we hope it will help to bring about a sea change in public attitudes, lead by politicians and the media, which will enable the reform of welfare policies and the introduction of other policies to tackle poverty.

Politicians and journalists play a key role in promoting positive attitudes, or reinforcing negative ones, of people living in poverty. Oxfam is therefore calling on politicians, commentators, and decision makers to recognise the unpaid contributions made by people on low incomes and the barriers to work and opportunity which make it difficult for some people to take up paid work, and to reflect this in their language, political activity and policy-making.

Specifically, Oxfam is calling for politicians, and journalists, to:

- **Use appropriate language when discussing people living in poverty** to avoid pandering to or reinforcing negative attitudes, beliefs and stereotypes.
- **Challenge negative language and attitudes** about people in poverty when they arise in political and media discourse.
- **Acknowledge and raise awareness of the contribution of people in poverty** to the UK economy and society through unpaid caring and community work.
- **Give a voice to people living in poverty.** Politicians and journalists should meaningfully seek the views, opinions and ideas of people living in poverty, and reflect their lived experience.

Oxfam is also calling on the new Conservative/Liberal Democrat government to implement the following recommendations:

- Revise the benefit system to enable unpaid work to be valued on its own merits. This includes allowing it to be combined securely with paid work – as well as being seen as the valuable step towards permanent, full-time employment it can often be.
- Implement a broader systemic change in the benefit and tax systems with regard to work incentives, to ensure that work always pays and that it never comes at the cost of the security of an individual's or a household's livelihoods.

References

- ¹ We refer to the relative measure of poverty, taking the poverty line as an income that is 60 per cent of median income in the UK.
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- ³ L Bamfield and T Horton (2009) *Understanding attitudes to tackling economic inequality*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation (Summary), p.4
- ⁴ The links between inequality, poverty and ill health have been mapped by many in recent years, including, for example, M Shaw, B Thomas, G Davey Smith, D Dorling (2008) *The Grim Reaper's Road Map: An atlas of mortality in Britain*, Policy Press
- ⁵ Department of Health (2008) *Tackling Health Inequalities 2007 Status report on the programme for action*, Department of Health
- ⁶ [Hhttp://www.poverty.org.uk/summary/key%20facts.shtml](http://www.poverty.org.uk/summary/key%20facts.shtml)
- ⁷ L Buckner and S Yeandle (2007a) *Valuing Carers – calculating the value of unpaid care*, University of Leeds and Carers UK, p.1
- ⁸ Carers UK (2007) *Real Change not Short Change: Time to deliver for carers*, Carers UK, p.3
- ⁹ House of Commons Department for Work and Pensions Committee (2008), *Valuing and Supporting Carers – Fourth Report of Session 2007-08*, The Stationery Office Ltd, p.13
- ¹⁰ For more information on Carer's Allowance see Direct.gov at: [Hwww.direct.gov.uk/en/CaringForSomeone/MoneyMatters/DG_10012522H](http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/CaringForSomeone/MoneyMatters/DG_10012522H)
- ¹¹ National Indicator 6 'Participation in regular volunteering'. National indicators are the priority objectives against which national government measures the performance of local government in England and Wales. The current national indicator set at the time of writing was put forward as part of the 2008 Comprehensive Spending Review. The 198 indicators are set out in full in *The New Performance Framework for Local Authorities and Local Authority Partnerships: Single Set of National Indicators*, available from [Hwww.communities.gov.uk/publications/localgovernment/nationalindicatorH](http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/localgovernment/nationalindicatorH)
- ¹² Briefing note for Local Strategic Partnerships: NI6: 'Participation in Regular Volunteering', Cabinet Office of the Third Sector, 2008
- ¹³ C Williams and J Windebank (2002) 'The uneven geographies of informal economic activities: a case study of two British Cities', *Work, Employment and Society* Vol 16 No 2 Cambridge: Cambridge Journals
- ¹⁴ See the recent case of a pregnant woman who declared her volunteering for Derbyshire Unemployed Workers Centres (DUWCs) and had her benefits stopped. The ordeal contributed to stress-related ill health and, she believes, to her baby being born early. See *Solidarity 24*, the quarterly newsletter of DUWCs, summer 2009
- ¹⁵ Bamfield *et al.* (2009) *Op cit.* p.23
- ¹⁶ <http://www.poverty.org.uk/16/index.shtml>
- ¹⁷ <http://www.poverty.org.uk/39/index.shtml>

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Oxfam's work in the UK

Oxfam works to overcome poverty in the UK in three ways. We develop projects with people living in poverty to improve their lives and show how things can change. We raise public awareness of poverty to create pressure for change. And we work with policy makers to tackle the causes of poverty. For more information on the issues raised in this paper, or Oxfam's work to end poverty in the UK, email ukpoverty@oxfam.org.uk.

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