

8. Get Heard!

People living in poverty in the UK give their views on government policy



Central Liverpool – one of the cities where ‘Get Heard’ workshops took place

One in five people in the UK lives in poverty. They suffer not just from low incomes, but from discrimination and prejudice. Their voices are rarely heard, especially by those in power. This paper describes a unique experiment to bring the voices of those living in poverty to the attention of the UK government as part of the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion. ‘Get Heard’ was one of the largest projects of its kind ever undertaken in the UK and is viewed as a model of good practice within the European Union. The paper explains how the project worked, and draws out the lessons learned for the future.

Introduction

The United Kingdom (UK) may be part of the rich world, but one in five people lives in poverty.¹ Many are unable to afford the essentials they need to live a dignified life, such as adequate clothing, sufficient food for their children, or heating for their homes. The UK has the sixth largest economy in the world,² and currently ranks 16th on the United Nations Human Development Index, but it is the least equal society in the European Union (EU).³

The word 'poverty' has become increasingly used in tandem with the term 'social exclusion'.⁴ This helps to focus on how people are affected by low incomes, rather than solely concentrating on the incomes themselves. 'Social exclusion' is used to emphasise the processes which push people to the edge of society, limit their access to resources and opportunities, and curtail their participation in normal social and cultural life.

Each country, influenced by its specific history and culture, creates a structure that puts some citizens at a significant disadvantage. Within the UK, as in other countries, this results in communities or sectors of society who are more vulnerable to the challenges of life. These people include many women, elderly people, migrants, black and minority ethnic people, those who are disabled, and children. For example, one in three children – 3.8 million – are currently living in poverty in the UK, one of the highest rates in the industrialised world.⁵ Women are 14 per cent more likely than men to live in households with incomes that are below 60 per cent of the national average.⁶ Evidence from the programme indicates that people living in poverty found it difficult, if not impossible, to voice their opinions about what caused and what maintains their poverty. They lack the opportunities, contacts, and links to have a say about the issues affecting their lives. As these people pointed out:

'Being poor and not being able to provide for the child you love can cause depression.'

'We [disabled people] are fed up with the "sit in the corner and be quiet" syndrome.'

'Being in receipt of benefits or on a low wage breeds high-interest debt, isolation, loneliness, low self-esteem.'

'So many people just don't have the *confidence*, they have no *self-worth*. Much of poverty has to do with finance, but there are routes out of poverty that come with confidence.'⁷

In order to reduce poverty and social exclusion, those in power need to listen to people from groups who are socially excluded. In June 2001, EU member states published their first National Action Plans on Social Inclusion (NAPs), opening up a space to let people in poverty have their say about their government's anti-poverty policy

approaches. Each EU country must produce a NAP every two years, and participants must include a wide range of groups, from government officials to those living in poverty. In the UK, in 2004, different groups mobilised into a campaign called 'Get Heard' in order to feed into the 2006 NAP.

The Get Heard project: hearing those in poverty

Get Heard was one of the largest projects ever undertaken in the UK where people with first-hand experience of poverty gave their views on government policies designed to combat poverty. The campaign was set up by the Social Policy Task Force (SPTF),⁸ a coalition of anti-poverty organisations, and funded by the European Commission, the UK government's Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), Oxfam GB, and the Church of Scotland. There were 2.5 paid posts and many volunteers.

Grassroots community members gave their views through workshops, which they organised themselves, usually with the help of their regional anti-poverty network. A total of 146 workshops were held around the UK between December 2004 and December 2005: 81 in England, 45 in Scotland, 14 in Northern Ireland, and six in Wales. A large number of people took part, from a wide range of different geographical areas and communities of interest, such as: people with experience of mental ill-health; Asian women; single mothers; parents of young children and parents of teenagers; unemployed men; travellers' groups; debt-support groups; domestic violence survivors' groups; asylum seekers and migrants – and many others.

Get Heard workshop participants were asked to talk about government policies and initiatives, and to answer the questions: 'What's working?', 'What's not working?', and 'How should things be done differently?'. The participants selected the topics themselves. The following case study is an example of the opportunities participants felt the project provided for them.

Kenny Brabbins, participant in Merseyside workshop⁹

Kenny lives on government benefits and is about to reach pensionable age. He became involved in Get Heard through a local trust because he believed that: 'people in my age group aren't usually listened to'.

He was pleased and surprised that people listened to him in the workshop; this encouraged his confidence to speak in public. He thinks it is unusual to have such a situation because people in poverty tend to be withdrawn, thinking: 'I don't want to get involved'.

The workshop helped him to build a collective identity with others in poverty: 'I'm not the only one in this situation; we're all the same...I started to get more positive in my attitude...'. Kenny's overview comment shows the empowerment and voice available through the project: 'Get Heard to me personally means that I get heard'.

Now he is encouraging other people from his community to get involved.

The Get Heard project was the first national-level project in a wealthy country to provide people in poverty a platform from which they could speak out and become active participants in their society. Despite encouragement to include all actors, no other EU country had major participation from those in poverty in their NAPs. Get Heard has been well received, and within the EU it is cited as good practice. It is also an example of using successful poverty-reducing techniques from the South, such as Participatory Poverty Assessments (PPAs), and applying them to the North.

Findings

The participants in the Get Heard project were able to choose whatever issues they wanted to cover. The following five were those most frequently discussed, demonstrating the greatest concerns of workshop participants:

- 1 Perceptions of people experiencing poverty must change.
- 2 The benefits system must be reformed to really help people experiencing poverty.
- 3 Parents must be appreciated and better understood.
- 4 Services must be reformed so that they really work for people experiencing poverty.
- 5 People experiencing poverty must be involved and listened to.¹⁰

The majority of these concerns (1, 3, and 5) refer to issues of dignity and power within society. The findings of the project show that people in poverty want more than just more money to spend. They want to be visible, respected members of society.

Of course, economic concerns were also important – the most popular topics were issues relating to work, welfare, benefits, and training. Once in poverty it is incredibly hard to pull yourself out of it, due to the structure of the benefit system. For example, unemployment benefits often end the day before someone starts a new job, but that person will not receive his or her wages until the end of the next month. For someone in poverty it is impossible for them to find the means to live on during that intervening time, which makes it safer to stay on benefits rather than find work. Get Heard showed that people living in poverty must be listened to, not just because it is fair, but because it is the only way to get accurate information on how to best improve policies on reducing poverty.

Women's voices¹¹

Women in the Get Heard project who often feel they are not listened to, were able to articulate a range of gender-specific problems:

'There is still an expectation that women will be compliant, work more and longer for less pay, and do most of the domestic stuff but not take charge. Also that they will be there to support their children irrespective of what the father does.'

'Successful women are seen as too bossy, but men are praised and given better jobs.'

'Women get into debt to give their children a better life.'

'I see the children don't go short but it is all a bit basic. There's nothing spare for luxuries. I shouldn't complain because we aren't terrorised here, we have a roof over our heads and we aren't hungry or cold – most of the time.'

'No one really knows how little I live on. My neighbours are quite well off and I try to maintain standards. They don't know how mean my ex-husband is. He's a pillar of our community and no one would believe how he treats me. I cannot remember when I could last afford to buy a pair of shoes.'

The impact of the project

The information from the workshops gives the most well-rounded and comprehensive picture of the reality of life for people in poverty in the UK, and how their lives are impacted by government policy. The project had an impact in four main ways: supporting people in poverty to influence policy; demonstrating the importance of participation; supporting the work of other anti-poverty organisations; and encouraging active citizenship.

Supporting people in poverty to influence policy

The findings of Get Heard were submitted to the DWP. The project was part of the NAP 2006 process and has been influential in the planning of NAP 2008. According to Clare Cochrane of Oxfam GB's UK Poverty Programme, 'The NAP process is not an opportunity to lobby for new policy initiatives, but the NAP when published provides a clear guide to government social exclusion policy, and when the process is inclusive of people with experience of poverty, provides an important mechanism for dialogue between government and grassroots on social exclusion policy.'¹² It is problematic to trace direct links from the Get Heard workshops to policy developments, but there have been policy developments that correspond with demands made by workshop participants, and Get Heard undoubtedly raised awareness of such concerns. For example, the Treasury wrote off the debts for tax-credit overpayments, and also changed the tax-credit limit. Both of these ideas were issues

frequently discussed and passionately supported in Get Heard workshops.

Demonstrating the importance of participation

The success of the project highlighted the importance of involving poor people in the policy process. The praise Get Heard received from Europe, and the usefulness of the information for policy makers, resulted in the process being a catalyst for further participation projects. For example, the DWP organised a conference in May 2007 on 'Working together to reduce poverty and inequality'. This included people living in poverty discussing the issues highlighted in the Get Heard project. It brought government ministers and policy makers face-to-face with those who are affected by the policies they design.

Supporting the work of anti-poverty organisations

The project helped to increase and improve the anti-poverty network by making its findings available to other organisations. For example, the Migrants Resource Centre in London used the findings of the project to publish a report examining how migrants experience poverty and social exclusion in the UK.¹³

Other organisations have used the project in a number of ways to make sure the voices of people living in poverty are heard by government. For example, a senior citizens' group in East Anglia lobbied local government for better housing; and groups in Merseyside held workshops and wrote a report called 'Merseyside Gets Heard: A Profile of Social Exclusion and Poverty on Merseyside' that they can use to lobby local and regional government.

Encouraging active citizenship

The workshops showed those involved that they are not alone in their situation and that they can influence the government policies affecting them. People were empowered through the respect they received, and the workshops reduced their sense of helplessness and isolation. The project motivated people to move away from the view that: 'There is no chance [for] people like us to make an improvement in our lives',¹⁴ towards a more positive outlook. When people believe they can have an impact, they are more willing to become actively involved in policy-influencing work.

Get Heard will continue to influence poverty and social exclusion policies. This is apparent from the NAP 2006 to 2008 strategy plans. It is often referred to in order to reinforce the points that are being made, for example around low pay; the NAP explains how getting people back into work does not automatically result in them moving out of poverty. Quotes from Get Heard are included to underpin the argument, such as; '[On low pay] you end up working on the same poverty line that you are trying to move on from'.¹⁵

Get Heard has also influenced the process of the 2008 NAP. The involvement of civil society and people in poverty is now taken as an essential part of the current and future strategy. Although another Get Heard is not planned, a project built on its foundation is emerging. This year, Oxfam will submit a paper on gender and social exclusion to the NAP 2008, as part of the 'Gender Works' project. This will explore the ways in which structural barriers cause and deepen women's social exclusion in three European countries – the UK, Austria, and Italy. The project will involve women in policy processes, build grassroots women's capacity for policy involvement, develop and disseminate tools for gender policy-making, train decision-makers in the use of gendered statistical and methodological tools, and provide gender-awareness training for those involved in tackling social exclusion in these three countries. The project gives a voice to women, and crucially also encourages the gender awareness of those in power.

The Get Heard project has provided a basis on which to build similar work. It has shown that speaking out in this way means that people living in poverty can influence policy and can also gain confidence – and know that their voices are being heard.

Problems and limitations

Get Heard tried to involve as many people as possible in the project, but was not able to access all community groups or all parts of the UK equally. As it was not meant to be a research or policy project there were some limitations to how much it succeeded in opening a space for all people to have their say. The main limitations were: regional variation; lack of involvement of particular groups; and inadequate local-government support.

Regional variations

The workshops were not evenly distributed throughout the UK. For example, 30 per cent took place in Scotland, while only 4 per cent were in Wales. The variations reflected where anti-poverty networks were strong and where they were weak; there is a well-established Poverty Alliance in Scotland that enabled Get Heard to be influential there.

Lack of involvement of particular groups

People only generally got involved in the project when they were part of established networks that were used to meeting and discussing personal topics. Social groupings outside these networks failed to engage with the project. For example, only one group of black men took part (although there were some individuals who took part in other groups), and there were no Asian men involved at all.¹⁶ The other significant group that did not take part was low-paid workers, because they are more reluctant to accept the fact that they

are poor, and because workshops were held during the working week.

Lack of local-government support

Though local governments could have been very helpful in facilitating the groups, many failed to show interest in the workshops. They did not see how they would benefit from getting involved in the NAPs. Their increased support and involvement would have helped to ensure that workshops took place, especially where anti-poverty networks were weak.

Recommendations

The Get Heard project had many successful elements; below are some ideas to help improve similar projects in future, including participants' views.

- Increase the lobbying elements of such projects and build this in from the start, so the findings can have a greater influence on policy. This can be done by deepening working relationships and expanding opportunities for dialogue between civil-society organisations (including both community-based organisations and larger NGOs), and government.
- Fund anti-poverty groups in advance to prepare proposals and ensure that they are adequately resourced throughout the process. This is especially important for smaller, grassroots organisations.
- Identify specific hard-to-reach groups, such as women and men from minority ethnic communities, at the beginning of the project. Put in place strategies to reach them through other existing community-based organisations, or through other local-government channels.
- Identify the barriers to working with local government, and the priorities of local authorities, in order to be able to work effectively with them and to use their processes and structures as channels for outreach to low-income community members.
- Ensure that regional variations in the strength of anti-poverty networks are taken into account at the start of a project. Countries with weaker networks could be allocated specific resources to build them up.
- Ensure that there is support and co-ordination between organisations in the network. This is crucial to the success of the project.
- Monitor and evaluate the extent to which bringing policy makers face-to-face with those who are affected influences those policies, and what else has an influence.

- Develop the capacity of anti-poverty networks around the UK to provide a sure foundation and dissemination network for any future participation projects.

Recommendations from participants¹⁷

Increase the depth of participation.

Follow up with action to show that people consulted are heard. 'It's really important to deliver when you collect people's thoughts and experiences.'

Make participation and consultation meaningful: do not use 'tokenistic participation, where "they hold consultations, but the decisions are already made", resulting in time and work invested by people [being] wasted; consultation needs to be a "two-way process"'.

Mainstream participation in decision-making: extend processes such as those used in Neighbourhood Renewal to other policy making.*

Widen participation: involve a wider range of grassroots community members – think about when and how consultations are held and how stakeholder involvement is invited, and how to enable more marginalised community members to participate.

Increase high-level support for participation and dialogue: MPs should give more support to the All Parliamentary Group on Poverty,** and local authorities should give 'more acknowledgement...that they "work for us"'.

Increase awareness among grassroots and community groups as to how they can influence decision-making locally, and support them to do so.

* Neighbourhood Renewal is the UK government's urban regeneration strategy in England.

** The All Party Parliamentary Group on Poverty is an interest group for Members of Parliament in the House of Commons. They meet regularly to discuss particular poverty issues, and lobby government and raise awareness amongst parliamentarians.

Notes

¹ Oxfam GB, 'UK poverty: how comfortable are you with poverty in the UK?', www.oxfam.org.uk/resources/ukpoverty/index.html (last accessed September 2008). The 'poverty' referred to in this paper is relative poverty, not absolute poverty. Relative poverty equates to people living on incomes which are below 60 per cent of the contemporary median.

² In terms of purchasing power parity (PPP).

³ According to the EU Gini Index, www.eurofound.europa.eu/areas/qualityoflife/eurlife/index.php?template=3&radioindic=158&idDomain=3 (last accessed September 2008).

⁴ The Poverty Site, 'Relative poverty, absolute poverty, and social exclusion', www.poverty.org.uk/summary/social%20exclusion.shtml (last accessed September 2008).

⁵ See www.endchildpoverty.org.uk/ (last accessed September 2008).

⁶ 'Women more likely than men to live in poverty', *The Guardian*, 17 September 2003, www.guardian.co.uk/money/2003/sep/17/womenandmoney.socialexclusion (last accessed September 2008).

⁷ Participants in Get Heard workshops. Get Heard (2006) 'People Experiencing Poverty Speak Out on Social Exclusion: National Action Plan on Social Inclusion 2006', www.ukcap.org/getheard/pdf/Get%20Heard%20report%202nd%20print.pdf (last accessed September 2008).

⁸ Including the European Anti-Poverty Network, England; Poverty Alliance, Scotland; Northern Ireland Anti-Poverty Network; Anti-Poverty Network Cymru, Wales; Oxfam's UK Poverty Programme; the UK Coalition Against Poverty; and Age Concern.

⁹ Interview with Kim Rowe, Oxfam GB, December 2005.

¹⁰ Get Heard (2006) *op.cit.*, p. 4.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

¹² Taken from interview with Clare Cochrane.

¹³ Migrants Resource Centre (2006) 'A Stronger Voice', www.migrantsresourcecentre.org.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=56&Itemid=70 (last accessed September 2008).

¹⁴ Get Heard (2006) *op.cit.*, p. 31.

¹⁵ Department for Work and Pensions (2006) 'UK National Report on Strategies for Social Protection and Social Inclusion: 2006–2008', p.19, www.dwp.gov.uk/publications/dwp/2006/socialprotection/ (last accessed September 2008).

¹⁶ Since the Get Heard project, Oxfam GB has set up a Race Programme, which has established links with these previously excluded groupings.

¹⁷ Get Heard (2006) *op.cit.*, p. 39.

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