



# Voices for a Change

## finding solutions to the experience of poverty in London

We can never gain a real insight into the effect of poverty on people's lives unless we listen to what the most socially excluded people have to say about their experience. *Voices for a Change* was therefore created as a wholly participatory project.

- 1 The project involved training people living in poverty as peer researchers and to become spokespeople on behalf of those experiencing poverty.
- 1 The peer researchers talked to people living in poverty in London to ask them what support they need to help them move out of poverty.

Actively involving people with experience of poverty throughout the research adds real value to the richness and relevance of the research findings and brings many benefits to the participants.<sup>1</sup>

### The peer researchers

The *Voices for a Change* project invited a group of 18 potential participants, with diverse experience of poverty (age, ethnicity, gender and disability), to become peer researchers. Most of them had previous experience of ATD Fourth World's participatory policy development work, but none of them had any experience of research.

After initial training sessions in confidence-building, public speaking and interviewing skills, 12 members of the group decided to become involved as peer researchers. Over the 15-month project, only one participant dropped out – and this was due to family circumstances.

Peer researchers met monthly to produce an interview guide. They faced many obstacles to participation because of the complications of living in poverty themselves; for instance, having to deal with benefits being stopped or having to lay out the fare money to get to meetings even though all their travel costs would be refunded when they arrived.

A pace was set that allowed all peer researchers to feel comfortable with their role. The project faced a particular challenge with the need to ensure that all peer researchers were able to understand the

### Voices for a Change

The aim of this peer research project was to make policy recommendations to local and central government policy-makers with a poverty and social exclusion remit, informed by the knowledge of people with first-hand experience of poverty.

ATD Fourth World ran the project from March 2007 to June 2008, supported by Child Poverty Action Group; it was funded by the City Parochial Foundation and Oxfam's UK Poverty Programme.

A full report of the project, published by ATD Fourth World, can be downloaded from [www.atd-uk.org](http://www.atd-uk.org)

content and to contribute to discussions. A development worker carried out regular phone calls and home visits to go over the content of meetings and training sessions, and to make sure that people felt positive about their involvement.

The confidence and skills they gained from the project has enabled the researchers themselves to move on. One researcher, who now has a part-time job with a training organisation, said:

*Do not underestimate the need for confidence-building. I definitely feel able to take the skills gained (from the project), such as speaking, listening and team work, and to apply them in another setting.*

Another, after long-term unemployment, is undertaking retail work experience. A third has become very active in her community – volunteering in the local library and with an environmental group that campaigns for sustainable energy, which involves giving presentations to people about energy-saving methods. One peer researcher said:

*The project gives you the confidence to be able to do things for yourself ... When I get a chance I'm going to pay a visit to my local council, to see what they're doing about poverty in the area, and I'll show them our report.*

## The interviewees

To recruit interview respondents, peer researchers were asked to think about people within their community who they felt were struggling and marginalized. ATD Fourth World project workers also recommended names of people known to their projects who were experiencing deep poverty. The Migrants Resource Centre<sup>2</sup> was able to refer migrant workers or asylum-seekers living in long-term poverty.

Interviews were carried out in pairs by the peer researchers. In total, 31 people were interviewed:

- 1 19 were from a black or minority ethnic background
- 1 8 were male
- 1 7 were in some form of employment
- 1 3 were under 20
- 1 2 were over 60
- 1 8 were lone-parent households.

# What people told us about living in poverty

Working with Oxfam's UK Poverty Programme, the project used a Sustainable Livelihood Approach (SLA)<sup>3</sup> to analyse people's existing assets and how they use them to build a sustainable livelihood:

- 1 human assets – education and skills, mental health, physical health
- 1 public assets – statutory services, public transport
- 1 social assets – family and friends, voluntary organisations and faith groups
- 1 financial assets – income from employment or state benefits
- 1 physical assets – housing, vehicle, white goods

The peer researchers formulated policy recommendations based on their analysis of the interviews.

## Resilience: how some people manage poverty

Some of those interviewed had acquired a resilience to help them get by.

*Best thing is having guts, the balls to get up every day.*

Others did more than that. Although they often had a difficult experience of the education system as children, a third of the participants had the strength and spirit to acquire new skills.

*Because I'm jobless and nobody wants to employ me, I've got educated, self-educated, because I have a lot of free time to read.*

*I like learning and have just finished an A-level course on facilitation. I speak French and Portuguese. We should take advantage of education when it is free.*

Despite their low income, many participants built up strategies to get by on their money.

*What ways do I make money go further? Sometimes by sacrificing one of the bills till another week, so the money can go that little bit further on something else.*

*I try to budget, I put the kids' needs before bills.*

Good public services were important. A third of participants reported positive experiences from using health care services, especially their GP. There were also positive comments about Sure Start from all the parents who had used it.

*I love Sure Start (...) just the sense that they kind of provide services for the children.*

Voluntary organisations and faith groups gave support to a third of participants.

*Going to church, meeting people, I feel better because I feel happy. When I stay indoors I feel a bit frustrated and a bit lonely, but when I go to church I socialise.*

*The only people that have been supportive is a local charity. They've been with me throughout.*

Above all, the support of friends, neighbours and family was vital for many people.

*I obviously received much help and support from the members of the Bengali community in the area. The English people are also very helpful. They are always willing to help if you can communicate with them and make them understand what sort of help it is that you require.*

*I try and do things myself but when I get stuck or get letters that I don't understand then I ask Jane, who's my landlady because she's better at working things out than I am, otherwise I don't like asking people.*

- **Services need to build on the resilience and positive steps people make to move out of poverty.**
- **Policy-makers must recognise that most people want the means to support themselves; they do not want to depend on 'handouts'.**

## Moving out of poverty: what help do people need

### Create a better understanding of poverty

To meet the needs and expectations of people living in poverty, frontline service providers and practitioners, as well as policy-makers, need to understand how poverty affects their lives. The statutory and private sectors should learn from voluntary and community organisations how to view people as having a potential to be developed rather than as a problem to be solved.

When working with families, services should not mistake poverty for neglect or apathy. To help build trust with people living in poverty, they should use language that empowers rather than stigmatises.

*I used to be in touch with the social services, but (...) it's like they wouldn't listen to me. I tried to explain to them something and they weren't even listening.*

*I have worked through my problems: counselling, Sure Start, Home-Start ... talking helps – not judging. We have our own solutions.*

- **Provide poverty awareness training, delivered by people with experience of poverty.**
- **Promote opportunities for the participation of people living in poverty to influence policy and practice.**
- **Focus support on the whole family to reduce the risk of children from a poor background entering the care system because of poverty rather than any neglect or abuse.**

### Improve access to services

Almost half of those interviewed reported feelings of depression, stress and anxiety which compromises their ability to move out of poverty. Whether these mental health issues are the *result* or the *cause* of individuals being in poverty, they are a barrier to people moving out of poverty.

*... I'm so ill, my head is getting worse and my body is getting worse, and if I sit down and think about money it's the same problems, the same routine, the same every day, nothing changes.*

More than half of those interviewed said that the services they used were unhelpful, unapproachable, complicated to use or even untrustworthy.

*They don't even help you get a job in the job centre. They just tell you to 'sign here, and see you next week'.*

*In reality, the services did not help me. In reality, people who are from the street give you information, where you can go and how you can survive. But when you want information from there (Jobcentre Plus) they don't know anything.*

- **Build on people's trust of their GPs by locating other services within surgeries (such as advice on benefits, finding work, family support services).**
- **Ensure easier and earlier access to treatment and counselling for mental health issues.**
- **Sustained financial support should be given to local community projects which build inclusion and social cohesion.**
- **Door-to-door outreach services are needed to support people on their terms and on their own territory.**
- **Recognise that people living in poverty are more likely to be victims of crime and offer appropriate support and improve security in deprived areas to prevent crime.**

## Ensure an adequate income for all

People living in poverty are not necessarily unemployed or unwilling to work. Many other factors can leave working people struggling financially: low rates of pay, employers who employ 'off the books' and avoid paying for entitlements.

Most of those receiving state benefits reported that these were insufficient to meet basic needs and that the complexity of the system created problems.

For some recent migrants, the financial problems are a result of not having the right to work.

It is often very difficult for ex-offenders to find work; a number of participants cited having a criminal record, or a family member being released from prison, as creating an additional financial strain.

Over a quarter of those interviewed said they found public transport too expensive.

*I go through periods, especially towards the end of the second week, before I will get money again, sometimes by not doing anything at all, sometimes by not even eating. Maybe I get a pint of milk or so, and a bit of porridge.*

*I can count out 200 agencies which give jobs cash-in-hand to people, but only to people who do not speak English because they won't mix up their business.*

*My health is not very good, I had an operation for my leg. If I go to hospital, I have one day off for hospital but they take the money, I don't get paid.*

*For the first time in my life I lied to my children. I didn't explain to my children that I was on the streets, I didn't explain that I can't find work (...) They don't understand my battle, why I feel ridiculous and ashamed for the first time in 44 years of my life. I feel ridiculous, humble, I feel nobody (...)*

*With low income jobs, right, you ain't got no chance: You work as hard as the next person, but you're receiving a bare pittance of money, and so often you end up financially in debt.*

- **Strengthen enforcement of employment laws intended to prevent employers and agencies to avoid paying overtime, sick and holiday pay.**
- **Prosecute employers who employ 'off the books' to a degree that it acts as a deterrent.**
- **Review the rate at which benefits are updated to ensure they keep pace with rising fuel and food costs and to reduce inequality.**
- **Increase benefit disregards so people can try out work without having to break the law.**
- **Cut the bureaucracy involved in obtaining a national insurance number for recent arrivals.**
- **Allow asylum-seekers to work so they can contribute their skills to society and pay tax.**
- **Reduce the length of time before a conviction becomes spent for certain non-violent offences.**
- **Reinstate half-price bus travel in London and extend it to all those on low-income.**

1 Bennett F. with Roberts M., *From Input to Influence*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2004.

2 More information available from [www.migrantsresourcecentre.org.uk](http://www.migrantsresourcecentre.org.uk)

3 See [http://www.livelihoods.org/info/guidance\\_sheets\\_pdfs/section2.pdf](http://www.livelihoods.org/info/guidance_sheets_pdfs/section2.pdf) for further information about this approach.

## Further information

**Voices for a Change** is published by ATD Fourth World (ISBN 978-0-9508514-9-5). The summary and full report can be downloaded from [www.atd-uk.org/publications/INDEXPGC.htm](http://www.atd-uk.org/publications/INDEXPGC.htm)



**ATD Fourth World** works alongside people living in long-term poverty to support them in their refusal to accept poverty as a fact of life and find the solutions to eradicate it together. More information from [www.atd-uk.org](http://www.atd-uk.org)



**Child Poverty Action Group** campaigns for the abolition of child poverty in the UK and for a better deal for low-income families and children. More information from [www.cpag.org.uk](http://www.cpag.org.uk)



**City Parochial Foundation** is an independent funder which aims to enable and empower the poor of London to tackle poverty and its root causes. More information from [www.cityparochial.org.uk](http://www.cityparochial.org.uk)



**Oxfam's UK Poverty Programme (UKPP)** was established in 1996 to work with partners to change how poverty is understood and challenged throughout the country. More information from [www.oxfamgb.org/ukpp](http://www.oxfamgb.org/ukpp)

we support  child poverty

ATD Fourth World is a member of the Campaign to End Child Poverty