**" More effective
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UK COALITION · AGAINST POVERTY ·

communicating
poverty
REPORT

Contents

Summary

More effective communications are needed to build greater support amongst the general public for efforts to reduce poverty and inequality. Anti-poverty campaigners find it difficult at times even to involve people who are living on low incomes, and who would personally benefit from lower levels of poverty in the UK.

This report is a contribution to the debate about how ideas, policies and proposals to tackle poverty could be communicated more effectively. Unlike other pieces of research which have examined attitudes to poverty amongst the general public as a whole, this report focuses on people who have direct experience of poverty themselves – how they themselves communicate about poverty, and their views about how service providers, politicians, campaigners and the media communicated about poverty.

The report presents the findings from six workshops held between August and October 2007 to discuss how poverty is talked about. These workshops were held in Nottingham, Cardiff, Derry, London, Washington and the Peak District. The report also summarises some of the learning from two recent projects, which have involved people with direct experience of poverty in contributing to the design and evaluation of anti-poverty policies. These were the 'Get Heard' Project in 2005 and the Working Together to Reduce Poverty and Inequality Conference in 2007. The people who contributed to this report came from a wide variety of backgrounds, reflecting the diversity of people who live in poverty in the UK today. The report concludes with some ideas for further areas of research, which could build on the findings presented here.

Different people understand the word 'poverty' in different ways. Participants related poverty to not having enough money, both in absolute terms of paying the bills, but also relative to other people. But for people living on low incomes, poverty was also about the stress and feelings of powerlessness, 'being a second class citizen', or 'not being able to give your children what everyone else has [which] means that they get bullied'.

A discussion about how poverty could be explained and talked about in schools brought forward praise for the work that has been done to explain and build tolerance for different cultures and traditions. As one participant put it, 'they understand more about children in Africa then about what it's like for some people here'. In contrast, participants reported high levels of prejudice by many parents, children and teachers who did not have experience of poverty themselves. For children, the diversity awareness teaching could perhaps be a model for communicating more effectively about poverty.

Sometimes images are more powerful than words in raising awareness and understanding of an issue such as poverty. Participants were asked for metaphors of how poverty affected them, their families and their communities, and responses varied widely. These included 'travelling through a desert, with maps and water having been taken away', or like being on a wheel: 'People might be doing OK at the moment, but it only takes a turn of the wheel and things can change, people can drop down' or 'mining for precious stones, but people only seeing the rock ... there's gems everywhere'.

Participants discussed media coverage. In one exercise, they considered an article from the Daily Mirror about poverty. The picture accompanying the story had been chosen by the newspaper as a 'typical parent and child suffering poverty'. The responses from the participants made it clear that many of them thought that it was anything but 'typical'. This highlights the difficulties which even sympathetic journalists writing about poverty face.

The desire to be involved in the work of ending poverty, rather than being passive recipients of efforts of others, was very widely held. Participants felt that spokespeople for anti-poverty campaigns should include those who have direct experience of the problem, as they are more likely to be able to explain things better and not accidentally put people off. Campaigners were urged to 'use real people – no two people are the same'.

Alongside campaigns which seek to build public support by shocking them with negative images, participants felt that two other sorts of messages were important and should be used more frequently. Positive messages were felt to be vital so that people would be inspired to get involved: 'They should make it clear that there is hope'. The groups also thought that challenging stereotypes would be an effective way of grabbing attention. 'When I hear about a campaign, it must feel possible for me to do my bit'.

Politicians won praise for the all too rare occasions when they spent time communicating directly with people who have experience of poverty, rather than using jargon and blaming people for being in poverty. An example of the challenge that politicians face in persuading sceptical people that they really care about doing something about poverty was summed up by the comment that 'I don't want to tell them how to communicate better, because they shouldn't be thinking about that, they should be actually doing things'.

While there were a wide range of views about the extent of poverty in the UK and what the most effective ways to communicate about it should be, there was a surprising degree of agreement about what a society without poverty would look like. To investigate this, participants were asked what would be different if a miracle occurred. The responses fell into three main categories. In the 'miracle society', everyone would have enough money, good health and more time for the family and a stronger sense of community. This is one area which could be a fruitful one for people trying to communicate about poverty, making the case and building awareness that a society free from poverty is possible and doesn't take a miracle.

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Communicating poverty: understanding attitudes and building effective communication
Background

This report discusses the communication of poverty in the UK from the perspective of people who are living on low incomes [1]. It investigates their views about the way poverty is discussed in day-to-day life; how campaigners, journalists and others currently speak and write about poverty. It also suggests ways to make the communication of issues relating to poverty in the UK more constructive by changing language, images, framing and presentation.

The UK Coalition Against Poverty (UKCAP) works to enable people who experience poverty in the UK to play an active part in developing national policies for the eradication of poverty. In preparing this report, we have drawn on our work with anti-poverty groups and researchers which touched directly or indirectly on the communication of poverty.

This report starts with a discussion of other related initiatives which preceded the workshops and informed the debate about communicating poverty. Then there is a brief explanation of the format of the workshops and the different findings of the workshops. Finally, there are some suggestions for further areas of research, and appendices giving the programme of the workshops.

This research builds on the work carried out earlier by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation/Ipsos-MORI, which explored public attitudes to UK poverty and their implications for communicating poverty [2]. This research found that there is a fragmented understanding of the experience of living in poverty; that statistics do not change attitudes; that many people do not see why people cannot get themselves out of poverty; that people associate the term 'poverty' with Africa; and that many people feel that only those who are seen to have contributed to society are entitled to support when coping with poverty.

People in poverty feel their life is a series of no entry signs

It found that people's attitudes were linked to their own experience of poverty combined with their broader view of the role of society, state and the individual. It explored ways of communicating poverty effectively in order to bring in

a greater number of people to a constructive discussion about poverty. It highlighted the need for real life stories to increase an awareness of the existence and experience of poverty in the UK, and the need to link these to an explanation of the wider causes underlying UK poverty, along with possible solutions. It explored a number of metaphors – such as 'Life as a Game' – to try to do this. Through the discussions in the workshops, it is possible to get an insight into how far people on low incomes share these views on how poverty is communicated now, and how it could be communicated in the future.

Other related initiatives

The 'Get Heard' project took place in 2005. It involved 147 local workshops in which people with experience of poverty discussed anti-poverty policies: what was working, what was not working and what could be done differently. From these, a report was submitted to the Department for Work and Pensions and, subsequently, incorporated into the National Action Plan on Social Inclusion 2006–8. Although 'Get Heard' was primarily concerned with policy, rather than how poverty was communicated, both the final report and the notes from the individual workshops offer insights into attitudes about people's understanding of poverty and how it is discussed. One particular theme, which was mentioned again and again, was respect: how successful policies and initiatives treated people on low incomes with respect. More negatively, it was noted that the official justification for some policies made people feel that the government was more interested in judging them than in understanding the problems they faced and offering help. The issue of respect is discussed further in the findings of this report.

The Get Heard Report

In April 2007, the UK Coalition Against Poverty organised a one-day workshop in Liverpool for 40 people with experience of poverty. The aim was to talk about what factors would help an anti-poverty campaign in the UK to be successful. At the workshop we discussed what we wanted politicians and the public to know about poverty, which the issues the campaign should address, what things might affect whether the campaign was successful, and how people with experience of poverty could play a part in the campaign. The findings, in so far as they relate to the communication of poverty, are discussed further in the findings of this report.

In July 2007, the Social Policy Task Force – a working group of anti-poverty organisations – organised a conference called 'Working Together to Reduce Poverty and Inequality' in conjunction with the Department for Work and Pensions. This conference brought together people who have experience of poverty and civil servants working on anti-poverty policies. There were six policy workshops covering: families,

communities, education, support in work, benefits and work, and crime and policing. A further session was designed by the Department of Work and Pensions' communications team to encourage groups to think about how to inform others about poverty in their area. The results of this session were then presented to delegates at the conference. Although this session took less than an hour, the groups came up with a wide variety of different presentation styles – from interviews to press releases to pictures which told a story – which could be effectively used to communicate information about their areas and their hopes for the future. These ideas are discussed in more detail in the findings of report.

This conference was the first of its kind in the United Kingdom, and it highlighted the fact that people who are often excluded from the debate about poverty have a lot to contribute, and frequently will know more from their own experiences than the policy experts.

In each discussion group there was a mixture of people. Some had previous experience of policy discussions about poverty while others had never before taken part in any kind of discussion group, or even been asked for their opinions. This mix helped to ensure that there were people in each group with the confidence to lead discussions whilst avoiding the problem of the 'usual suspects', where only people who have previous experience of interacting with decision-makers have the opportunity to take part. It was a different sort of event from a focus group or citizens' jury type of event, with participants and civil servants debating issues as equals, each bringing different skills and knowledge to the discussion.

Participants at the Warwick Conference

All the participants were nominated by local anti-poverty groups. This helped to ensure that they had the necessary support to be able to take part, and provided routes for follow-up work. One group, for example, made use of the creative exercise to lobby their local council and get them to take action in their local area. This kind of event could usefully be repeated at a local or regional level to help inform local priorities. One key finding was that when participants were able to prepare for the meeting at pre-meetings, they were more effective in making the most of the opportunity to contribute.

Workshops

In order to build on this work, UKCAP organised day-long workshops in different parts of the UK to look specifically at different aspects of people's understanding of poverty, and their views about how it is talked about. These workshops were held in Nottingham, Cardiff, Derry, London, Washington and the Peak District between August and October 2007.

As far as possible a wide range of people living on low incomes was included but the effort was not to be statistically representative in the groups' make-up. Rather, the emphasis was on facilitating in-depth discussion within the group. A total of 56 people took part in the workshops and more details about who took part can be found in Appendix A.

Each workshop followed a similar format (see Appendix B). In groups of up to eight people, participants discussed questions and scenarios designed to investigate the ways that poverty is discussed and described. A number of stimulant materials were used including newspaper cuttings and campaign materials.

Findings

## (i) In your own words:
what poverty means to people

The first question asked people what they thought people mean when they use the word 'poverty'. This tended to lead into a discussion of participants' own experience of poverty as well as initial views on how others talk about it. People gave answers both about what they themselves associated with poverty, and what they thought other people would associate with it.

Most, but not all, participants believed that poverty does exist in the UK, and that it has a number of different but related negative effects on people's lives.

Unsurprisingly, people related poverty directly to not having enough money, with comments including: '[poverty is about] not enough money to lead a full life', 'living day-to-day', 'not enough to pay bills and put food on the table', 'lack of resources' and 'not having enough to do what most people do'. The last comment suggests that people measure poverty in their own lives by the living standards of other people rather than just against an absolute measure of having enough to pay essential living costs. For example, discovering that your child was invited to a birthday party provoked feelings of 'panic about the extra five or ten pounds which just aren't there', and 'not being able to give your children what everyone else has means that they get bullied'.

For most people, poverty was about more than just money, a point which many in the workshops wished to emphasise very strongly. It was instead a cause of a 'lack of control over your life', 'spending my whole life struggling with myself', 'fear and embarrassment', 'being a second-class citizen', feeling 'excluded', and having 'lowered expectations'. Some felt these aspects were worse than the lack of money. 'Being chased for bills with no allowance for personal situation' was another example of the powerlessness caused by poverty. Even when people's situations improved, they felt that 'it stays with you; you cannot just go and buy something'. There was also a link between poverty and health. As one participant in Washington said: 'It's really hard to eat healthily when you've got to do your shopping weekly but get paid fortnightly, especially since I'm a diabetic'.
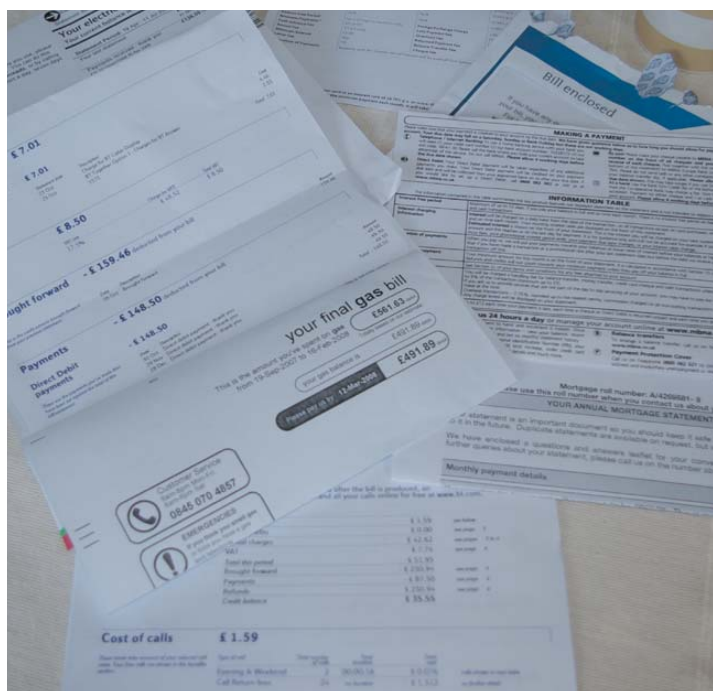
Being chased for bills is a constant worry

These psychological effects led to 'continual stress', 'mental isolation' and 'problems at work and in family life', provoking feelings of '[not being able to] get out of it' and 'not trusting people who want to help'. One participant reported that when her family moved to a new area, they felt like they were 'the ones who had lowered the tone'. Participants felt that older people, in particular, did not want to claim benefits because it was 'seen as a slur'. One example given was of someone who 'would go to another village to claim their benefits'. Participants in Washington suggested that 'some people just want to live like that', and that 'after a while you get used to [being homeless]'.

Particular groups of people and areas were associated with poverty, including 'single parents', 'stokes'[3], 'asylum seekers', 'people on benefits', 'homeless people', 'children in certain clothes', 'wains that aren't sent to school'[4], 'council estates', 'people who grew up in the village and can't find anywhere to live'. People decided whether or not others were in poverty using criteria such as 'how you speak', 'what you wear' and 'what you eat'. The group in the Peak District mentioned agency workers as people who were working but still in poverty: 'Employers take people on, have them for six weeks and then get rid of them and get someone else'. Another comment was: 'A lot of time, when you go to work, you're worse off ... you work 40 hours a week for an extra five pounds'. One migrant worker who was present explained the importance of not assuming that all migrant workers had the same experience of poverty – those who were able to speak English and who were better educated had many more opportunities than those who did not.

Participants were aware that many people did not share their views that poverty existed and was a widespread problem in the UK. They identified two different groups of people who, in their experience, tended to deny that there was widespread poverty in the UK.

The first group consisted of people who were living on low incomes but who resisted the 'stigma' that they felt came with admitting that they were in poverty. As one participant put it: 'You are frightened to say that you are poor'. These people would use phrases such as 'I suppose some people would say that I am poor' and 'there's always someone worse off'. They themselves rejected this description of poverty, often contrasting their position to the situation of people in Africa. Some older participants contrasted the situation now to that of 30 or more years ago. They said they felt that while there was poverty then, there is nothing like that now: 'If you're on the dole [now], you are not in serious poverty'.

The second group consisted of participants who had grown up in Africa and then come to the UK and who thought that only recent immigrants were living in poverty. They were surprised when they met people who had been born in Britain and who were living in poverty. As one person who attended an event organised by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in York earlier this year put it: 'It was really interesting coming here because I had never met anyone who was born in this country before who was poor'. In fact, many of the participants had only limited knowledge of the experience of people on low incomes outside their "own group" however they defined this, be it by age, region, ethnicity or other factors.

This is indicative of the fragmented nature of those working on anti-poverty measures. Some participants felt that tackling poverty in the UK should be a higher priority than international development: 'We give too much to the Third World'.

Participants were also aware that many people believed that poverty did not exist or, if it did, 'it was your own fault'. Some felt that this view was largely based on ignorance – 'you could get out of poverty in the past, it isn't like that any more' – while others felt that there were some people whose poverty was caused by their own laziness or other failings. Others reported that they found that teachers and health visitors lowered their expectations when dealing with children from families with low incomes, one reporting a health visitor as saying 'your route in life is mapped out at birth depending on your postcode'.

Participants in Washington reported that it seemed as though help was not going to the people who needed it most: 'You get help if you are a drug addict or an alcoholic, but not if you aren't ... It's not right. Help should be for everyone, not just for heroin addicts'.

Lastly, a majority of participants in every group felt that it shouldn't have to be like this with comments such as: 'You can't control the circumstances of your birth; everyone has a right to their own place on this planet'. Or: 'It's about how we as a society treat poor people; we don't have to put them in ghettos'.
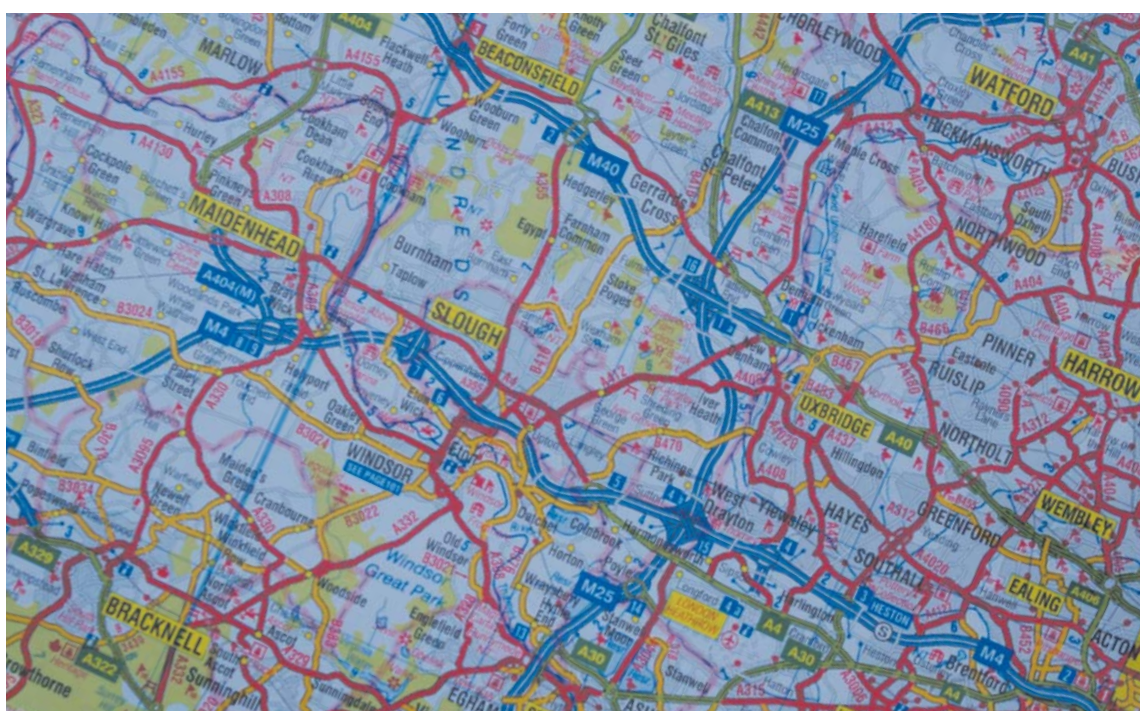
Life is mapped out at birth

(ii) In school: talking with children

Participants were asked to think about how they would talk about poverty if they had to go into a school to talk about it. This gave participants an opportunity to say how they would communicate poverty in their own words. In their responses, participants also discussed some of the challenges and problems involved in trying to explain the experience of poverty and build support for its eradication.

The initial reaction to the idea of talking about poverty in schools was very negative from some groups. 'You just wouldn't' was one comment. Several people felt that it was 'dangerous' and, unless handled well, could lead to 'poor children being picked on'. There would also be a resistance among children and even more so among their parents, who were told that they were in poverty if they and their family didn't recognise this situation. Participants in the Peak District thought: '[Being poor is] not something the kids would want to hear about. They want to hear about opportunities'.

However, all groups went on to discuss the potential benefits of discussing poverty in schools. Two themes emerged. First, that it is important to address the aspirations of those on low incomes early and for schools to ensure that children on low incomes do not feel that they should aim low. Second, the attitudes of children on higher incomes – and, indeed, the attitudes of children on low incomes to each other – was thought by many to be negative to children on low incomes and often a cause of bullying. Discussion of poverty could be part of a solution to this. Parents spoke very highly of the efforts that schools made to teach children

about other cultures and religions, and the way that this helped children to find out about where their classmates were from and their cultures and to promote tolerance. They felt that this could provide a possible model for talking about poverty. It should, they felt, be possible to tackle discrimination against poor people in the same way as these initiatives have tried to tackle racial discrimination: 'They understand more about children in Africa then about what it's like for some people here'.

Despite the concerns that participants had, most felt that 'children do want to talk about differences', and that primary school children in particular would be open to learning about poverty. The group in London, however, felt it might be easier to talk about poverty with older children.

It was suggested that images might be more effective than words and, rather than using the word poverty, it would be more meaningful to talk about 'mum not having much money' and to draw upon children's own experiences.

Others felt that it would be better not to make it about the children themselves, but instead use games[5] or ask questions as a 'wee alien' who is visiting earth but knows nothing about the planet. There was agreement that any training needed to be tailored to the particular audience, given the wide variety of backgrounds that children come from. One participant, who had experience of speaking in schools about life as a traveller, reported that primary school children were much more open-minded than older children.

Another idea was to integrate awareness of poverty into teaching about social skills, bullying and discrimination with the aim of showing that people shouldn't treat others badly just because they don't have much money. One participant reported that in an exercise that she had seen about poverty, children had said that the government should give parents more money. In this exercise none of the children thought people living in poverty were intrinsically bad, or that it was their own fault that they were in poverty. Another reported that attitudes to poverty among better-off children were 'vile' and an indication, possibly, of parents who believe that poverty is people's own fault and who pass on these prejudices to their children.

Teaching children 'good manners, how to behave when with others' was felt to be very important for educational success. Also, participants felt that it was important to 'bring in the positives' and to emphasise the common interests between people in poverty and other people.

All groups felt that it was essential to raise awareness about poverty among teachers. They reported 'children experiencing intimidation and teachers turning a blind eye', 'throw-away comments by teachers which are really hurtful', and the fact that 'even the best willed are patronising ... and blame the parents without understanding what it is like trying to bring up children while living in poverty'. Participants in the Peak District did point out that attitudes among teachers were much better than they used to be.

There was a lot of feeling about the cost of education, from the stigma associated with free school meals to the cost of uniforms or school trips. Every group mentioned what one participant called 'the trainer issue' (the need to buy branded trainers and other clothes to avoid bullying by other children). Participants in Washington suggested that it was important to teach children that: 'Poverty doesn't mean that you are different. Some children don't have things which others have; it doesn't mean they are bad'.

All the groups emphasised that great care and skill was needed so the subject was discussed sensitively and did not increase bullying or prejudice against children from low-income households. The experience of introducing other sensitive subjects into a school environment was thought to have a lot to offer by way of example.

Parents are under pressure to keep up with the latest trends

(iii) 'Deprived areas' and other technical terms

The next question examined the participants' thoughts about some of the terms commonly used by decision-makers, academics, policy advisers and anti-poverty workers about policies to tackle poverty. They were asked how they would explain to a group of young people that their area had a designated youth worker because it was a 'deprived area'. The groups discussed what they felt about this and other 'official' terms commonly used in discussions of poverty.

In a related scenario, participants were asked what advice they would give to a researcher who was about to start a project on some aspect of poverty in their local area. In discussions about the language used in policy-making and 'official' circles to describe poverty, participants displayed a good level of awareness of the terms. They also described the need to use these same terms to access resources. Mention was made of a related 'competition' for areas to appear to be the most deprived which, in turn, can disguise poverty in more mixed-income areas and can lead to hidden poverty in areas – such as the Peak District – which do not apparently meet the required criteria.

There were mixed views about the terminology which professional anti-poverty workers use. One participant said that 'deprived area', along with 'marginalised' and 'hard to reach' were the terms which most annoyed her. There was considerable cynicism, particularly among participants in Wales, about the extent to which these areas benefit from extra funding: 'We are told we are the number two most deprived area, but the local council just treats it like a cash cow. They don't want us to get better'. In Nottingham one participant felt that the term 'deprived' implied that people in an area are 'weak' and 'can't stand on their own feet', and another said that 'deprived sounds like

Poverty in rural areas is often hidden

you've allowed someone to take something off you'. 'Vulnerable' was a term which people didn't like because 'it ignores the fact that they haven't asked the young people what they want or [what] think should be done'.

Others took the view that, as participants in Derry put it, it was important to 'tell it like it is'. In Washington participants felt that the term 'deprived area' was 'straight to the point, people know what it means'. Participants in the Peak District who ran a local football club reported that being 'deprived' 'helped us get equipment ... it gives official status'. However, all participants felt that 'just because you come from a deprived area doesn't mean that all the people should be thought of as deprived'. Instead, 'you need to identify the needs of individuals, not just of groups'.

For example, some participants found that their area had missed out because it was not being classed as a 'deprived area'. Or that the money, which should be going to an area, was instead being spent on the salaries of professional workers who often did not even live in the area. They also felt that this kind of labelling would discourage companies from coming to the area, thus making jobs scarcer. 'Why call me anything?' was one comment which summarised this attitude.

It was felt that terms such as 'underprivileged', 'socially excluded' or 'socially oppressed' were less stigmatising, and that more positive language such as 'communities of interest', or the habit of talking about the potential of a community, should be encouraged. If the term deprived is used then participants felt strongly it should be clarified of what an area is deprived. While there was an initial negative reaction to many of the technical terms used in discussions of poverty, all groups came to the conclusion that any term or phrase could be corrupted or changed for the worst after a while.

When asked to describe in their own words what they understood by these technical terms, every participant used the word 'need': for instance, 'it's about what our area needs' or 'we should give people what they need'. There was also a strong preference for letting local people decide on priorities: 'They should be saying, 'how can we help?'' Since 'need' and 'help' are words which people use themselves when talking about services for their area it would be a good idea to use these words when professionals are talking about these issues.

(iv) Media

To look at what participants felt about how poverty is communicated in the media, they were asked what they would say if a journalist came to their house and asked them to say what 'poverty' meant. Then they were given stories from a range of different newspapers about poverty and asked for their responses to them.

Participants at the UKCAP media training day

There was quite good understanding about the difficulties that journalists face in writing about poverty: the supposed need for 'sensationalist' headlines, the fact that editors could influence the way that a story is slanted. Advertisers were also mentioned and thought to have a role to play in, directly or indirectly, influencing content of the media. Some participants thought they may even be influential in preventing stories which explain that, for example, poverty is the fault of employers not paying their staff high enough wages.

Participants felt that journalists were often ignorant about the reality of their lives and about poverty. There was also some distrust. 'If a journalist came to my door, I would punch him in the face', was one (tongue-in-cheek) comment. They felt that journalists make people fit their preconceived ideas about a story, rather than actually trying to find out what things are like in an area. There was an acknowledgement that, while the way that people on low incomes were treated was 'often unfair, it did sometimes make for good telly'.

Their advice to journalists included 'the need to build up trust'. They also pointed out that people won't just tell them their life story straightaway because poverty can be a very difficult subject to talk about, especially given the fear of being judged by others. Instead of always looking for sensationalist headlines, it was felt that journalists should try more 'quirky' headlines – such as 'I want to work!' or 'Could you live on this?' – and should work on stories which challenge people's attitudes. For example, when talking about 'scroungers' benefit fraud and tax avoidance should both be mentioned. Some participants said that they tune out of programmes like the news, but are interested in stories about things like a local community coming together and achieving things.

The group in Derry also suggested the need to talk about inequality. They felt that the media should run stories about people who are too rich, as well as those who are too poor. 'Who are the real scroungers?' was suggested as a possible title.

Another idea was to have a series in which someone who was comfortably off was deprived of the things they took for granted so that they (and viewers) found out what it was like to have to live like that. A possible image could be a photograph taken while the person was trying to cope without the things they needed and had previously taken for granted. In this way the viewers would see what it is like to be living in poverty and would reflect on how they might cope in such a situation. The group felt this would be an effective way of helping more people better understand the real problems that constantly arise when living in poverty.

At the conference held in Warwick University in July, one group chose to put across their message in the form of an interview between an interviewer and an asylum-seeker. The interviewer was initially hostile, but was won over by the simple and effective answers given, and by the images which he had chosen to put across his case. This highlights the value of giving people the chance to produce their own images to represent themselves, rather than having these images chosen by others.

A range of newspaper extracts were used in this exercise taken from the Daily Mail, Daily Mirror, News of the World and the Daily Express as well as BBC online. Participant reactions to many of the print media stories particularly those of the Daily Mail and Daily Express were uniformly negative, along the lines of 'if you open up that picture, I bet he is wearing a Nazi uniform'. People felt that many of the stories were aimed at reinforcing the prejudices of people who already held negative views about people on low incomes.

The extract from the Daily Mirror about child poverty prompted a wider variety of reactions. Some people said: 'Yes, I've felt like that'. Others felt that people would not want to read it because it looked too depressing, 'it's just overkill'. Some participants thought it good that the extract gave information about poverty while others felt that the photograph (which was used as a stereotype) suggested that all families living in poverty conformed to the image of an unhappy lone parent: 'why do they not show the whole family?' They felt that people would just turn the page and not want to read the rest of the story. The group in London felt that the woman in the photograph did not look as though she was living in poverty. The different reactions illustrate the very different sorts of images of living in poverty that people have.

Some participants felt that the image would be much more effective if it made people think about how anyone can be affected by poverty, whether or not they are a lone parent. They also felt that the piece would be much more effective if it was less unrelentingly negative. The phrase 'no hope' suggested that there was nothing that could be done, and hence no point in people engaging with it. Even a simple change to the headline to read 'No Money, No Hope?' would give a different tone to the piece, particularly if it also included some ideas for tackling child poverty. The phrase 'child poverty: a moral disgrace' made one participant angry, because it sounded as though she was being judged as a parent.

Those who had criticised the photo chosen to accompany the Daily Mirror article reacted more favourably to the image used to illustrate the BBC piece. They felt it conveyed the message that

Participants discuss headlines at UKCAP media training

poverty could affect anyone and challenged the stereotypes of the 'deserving' and the 'undeserving' poor. The article was, however, felt to be 'impersonal' and 'full of statistics'.

Some participants who reacted negatively to the other articles praised the article in the Morning Star, which they felt was more 'respectful'. Participants in Derry felt that this article 'didn't sensationalise things but just gave people the facts', and that it was very noticeable that 'all the quotes were on the side of the poor', unlike in any of the other pieces.

Participants in Washington were the only ones to see the story in the News of the World, headlined '4 million scroungers'. Their initial reaction was that 'there is a lot of truth in that ... people admit that they are on benefits because they don't want to take any job', and they could quickly think of examples to support the story: 'The man on full mobility incapacity benefit can walk ... others who really need it get less'. On the other

hand, participants thought the story was too simplistic and too quick to blame, offering comments including: 'What about the likes of us who can't get private care? It's not 'dole dished out for nothing'. And: 'how long have I been trying to get a job ... It's not possible'. Participants also felt that this focus distorted the reality for many people on low incomes, the majority they felt who have difficulty accessing their benefits and the many who do not claim all to which they are entitled.

At the Warwick conference, one group prepared a press release highlighting the problems faced by a community in North Wales. It subverted the technical language often used by experts to talk poverty and called for 'tough action to be taken against the "causes of anti-social community regeneration"'. After the conference, this press release was used by local community campaigners to help force the local authority into taking action to clear up the area.

(v) Metaphors

A number of exercises explored the new ways that participants might choose to describe poverty. In one exercise, participants were asked to describe a metaphor for their experience or understanding of poverty. They were then asked the 'miracle question' – if a miracle occurred overnight, what would change as a result.

Participants used a wide variety of metaphors to communicate their experience of poverty, with a common theme being feelings of being trapped or otherwise disempowered. In Nottingham, the experience of poverty was described as being 'like wrapped in red and white tape', with 'just one cut being needed so that I can free myself'. (This made reference to the images used in the foot and mouth campaign when the fields were closed off.) Another said that it was like 'travelling through a desert, with maps and water having been taken away', [6] while another described it as like 'Manchester United without the strikers'. In Washington, one participant described the experience of poverty as being like 'playing Russian roulette'.

Another metaphor used by some participants in Derry was that of being on a wheel: 'People might be doing OK at the moment, but it only takes a turn of the wheel and things can change, people can drop down.' A similar metaphor was of 'a colony of ants, where some get killed so that others survive'; this was felt to apply particularly to young people in London because of high levels of gun crime. One participant in the Peak District felt that her life was like 'being in the Waltons, battling along, doing my best and having good days and bad days, but [all] in the middle of the Great Depression in America'.

Lack of communication was another theme. One project worker described the fragmented services and initiatives at a community level as like being in 'different moon craters', where people aren't talking to each other or sharing experiences or reaching out to others. 'We all live in the same building, but nobody knows each other and there is no communication' was another example given.

In Washington, participants used the metaphor of 'mining for precious stones, but people only seeing the rock ... there's gems everywhere'. They felt that their area and the people in it were judged unfairly, and that people from outside the area didn't make the effort to understand. Similarly, the group in the Peak District suggested that they way potential was obscured by poverty could be described using the image of 'a pond, with lots of bright stars being reflected, but obscured by the mud'. Another example was a jar of sweets, all different, with professionals dipping into the jar and trying particular kinds of sweets but not trying others because they think they know which ones taste, without asking anyone or thinking to try the others.

The UK delegation to the 2007 European People Experiencing Poverty Conference brought a three-dimensional symbolic object. They chose a model which depicted a person at one end of a room. The door to prosperity was at the other end, not quite shut. Between the person and the door are a series of barriers, labelled as 'discrimination' and 'poor health' and so on.

Participants spoke of the barriers that leave them isolated and frustrated

One of the groups at the Warwick Conference picked up the theme of 'open spaces', contrasting 'good open spaces' (where children are able to go out and play, for example), with 'empty spaces' (where areas are fenced off or people are denied access). They also linked anti-poverty messages with environmental messages, with the message 'an empty fridge is bad for the planet' (bad for environmental sustainability and also bad for the family which can't afford to fill the fridge).

While participants used a wide variety of metaphors to describe poverty, most images evoked the ideas of isolation and frustration. The presence of descriptions of hidden potential and the more positive aspects of life are interesting.

(vi) Miracles

When asked to talk about what would change if a miracle happened and they were lifted out of poverty overnight, a notable consensus emerged. In comparison to the range of ways used to describe poverty outlined earlier, the absence of poverty seemed to present itself in broadly similar terms to most participants.

First, participants emphasised that an absence of poverty meant financial security for all. 'Everyone to have enough money', 'everyone to be equal', 'wipe out debt everywhere and stop it from starting again', 'less class differences[7]' were sentiments which were widely shared. Another common response was 'I'd win the lottery', though participants then went on to talk about how they would use this money 'to build a new youth centre' or to 'fund local projects without red tape'. 'If I won the lottery, I wouldn't leave Splott', was one comment, suggesting that winning the lottery was seen as a means to give them to power to improve local communities, rather than for personal enrichment. Individual financial security was also important: 'I'd go out and buy something rather than having to plan ahead and save up all the time'. 'I wanted to write all my life. Money came miraculously to pay for the publishing and someone did the cover for free', was an example of a 'miracle' which had actually happened to one participant in the Peak District. One attitude to work from a participant in Washington was that 'I'd like to have my dream job, and really enjoy going to work, and only have to work part time because it pays well enough'.

Second was physical and mental well-being, with comments including: 'good health, I think that is most important', 'more smiling', 'little acts of kindness', 'better health and less stress', 'no more mental ill-health',

'health is wealth'. Participants who mentioned this also brought up their desire to be in control of their own lives: 'being able to see beyond the next bill or crisis', 'walk straighter, taller, looking at one another', 'believe that things will get better'. This was linked to their hopes for their families: 'a breathing space for my kids', 'see my kids whenever I wanted'. One participant expanded on this, saying they would achieve: 'A better lifestyle, something for my children, a bigger garden for them to play in, pay back what I owe my mother and give her a better life'. Other examples included: 'I'd buy my husband a one-way ticket to New Zealand', 'my wife's gone' and 'I'd be a size 10'.

Third was a greater sense of community rather than individualism. 'Embrace others' good fortune', 'less competition and greed', 'less ignorance, more respect, more listening, less intolerance' were common suggestions. This was also linked into the need for personal well-being: 'People should be proud of who they are and their community.' There were also particular policy areas raised, revealing quite modest aspirations such as 'another 5,000 pitches for travellers' and 'industry to help people do meaningful work'.

Based on these three strands, there is a clear outline of what we could term the 'miracle society' in which the participants would aspire to live. This society would be based on the principles of greater equality, respect and dignity for all; good health; and much greater importance placed on both family and community. It is possible that an effective way of talking about poverty might be to focus on what its absence would look like. It would seem that there might be a greater consensus about what a society free from poverty would look like than there is about what poverty actually is.

(vii) Politicians

To examine responses to how poverty is discussed in the political sphere, two speeches were read out. The first was by Gordon Brown on child poverty. The second was by David Cameron on the need for society, as well as the state, to play a bigger role in tackling poverty. Participants were asked first for their responses to the speeches and were then asked about how they thought politicians, such as their own representatives, talk about poverty.

Participants tended to take quite a dim view of all politicians[8]. 'When I hear a politician talking, I tend to switch off', was one comment. The consensus was that politicians spend too much time talking and there were no actions to back up their words. One participant even said: 'I don't want to tell them how to communicate better, because they shouldn't be thinking about that, they should be actually doing things'. For all of that, they had clear views about the positives and negatives of the language used in two speeches that they heard.

The positives about both speeches were quite similar. They were described by those who liked them as 'inclusive', 'talking about lost potential', 'positive', 'talking about how to contribute something to the community', 'more mature', 'everyone's responsibility to improve society', 'all doing it together', 'more realistic', 'working together' and 'including instead of excluding'.

Criticisms included references to 'my party', which was felt to be self-centred and exclusive, and some people reacted negatively to talk about how everyone could fulfil their potential. Participants felt that mention should have been made of 'how kids can grow up to be great parents, rather than just talking about becoming composers', they said 'it was about the waste for society, but not about the impact of poverty on children', and that 'it was about children as future citizens and workers, not about how poverty means that they don't get the childhood that they deserve'. Other reasons for disliking the speeches included the views that it was 'confusing', 'unclear', and had 'too many big words' and too much jargon. There was a suggestion that the speakers needed to talk about 'the responsibility of the government and the community to do something about poverty, rather than talk about 'social responsibility'.

When asked how they would like politicians to talk about poverty, participants suggested that they should 'use specific examples, rather than talking in general' and should 'highlight successes'. They would also like to hear more about 'support for the community'. Participants generally felt that local politicians had more opportunity to be independent and talk about some of these issues. Participants wanted politicians to stand up for people in poverty and to challenge misconceptions.

They felt that politicians could also do a lot more to work with small groups that are doing good work in the community.

Participants would also like politicians to spend more time talking to and listening to people who are socially excluded, 'talk to the people who don't go to community events or parent-teacher evenings'. Their suggestions included home visits to the elderly and visiting School Councils. Several participants reported that politicians did not communicate or follow up after consultations or meetings, and this was given as a reason why people gave up trying to get involved or take part in these sorts of events: 'It doesn't feel worth jumping through all the hoops'. One participant in Washington compared talking to politicians as 'like Chinese Whispers, we say one thing, they hear another'. A strong call was made for more feedback following consultations.

Lastly, participants felt that politicians ought to say things that 'we all know are true, but no one talks about, like about how benefits are not enough to live on'.

(viii) Campaigners

Another scenario asked people how they thought that anti-poverty charities should campaign to build both awareness about poverty and public support for tackling it. They were asked for examples of recent campaigns which they had noticed and thought were particularly good or bad.

When asked about campaigns by charities which they thought were effective, not necessarily those focused on poverty, responses included the NSPCC, the campaign against water charges in Northern Ireland, the 'help my mate go to school' campaign organised by Barnardo's, campaigns run by Oxfam about global poverty such as buying goats for Christmas, Cathy Come Home, Comic Relief, the RSPCA's current campaign, and drink driving awareness campaigns. Participants gave the example of how storylines in soap operas helped to raise awareness of issues, and that this could be a good way of raising awareness about what poverty is really like.

Participants at the workshop in Liverpool during April emphasised the need for campaigns to avoid jargon and to be 'accessible and relevant and connecting with people's own experiences'. They also felt that campaigns should include events all round the country and not give the impression (as many campaigns do) of just being London-centred. People who had been involved in previous anti-poverty campaigns aimed at building understanding about poverty also mentioned that they felt that they had been required to expose themselves and their lives to others, which they had found a difficult experience.

They also felt that spokespeople for anti-poverty campaigns should include people who themselves have experience of poverty. They said that using local knowledge and experience would help to make sure that campaigns took account of local situations and didn't accidentally put people off: 'Use real people – no two people are the same'.

Campaigning workshop, April 2007, Liverpool

Participants also felt that two sorts
of messages were important. Positive
messages were felt to be vital so that
people would be inspired to get involved:
'They should make it clear that there
is hope'. The groups also thought that
challenging stereotypes would be an
effective way of grabbing attention.
'When I hear about a campaign, it must
feel possible for me to do my bit' was
one comment. Campaigns which raised
awareness only ran the risk of making
people think 'and now what? What
can I do about it?' Participants were
supportive of using celebrities as
prominent supporters of campaigns to
grab people's attention, but there were
some reservations about the credibility
of using very wealthy people to speak
out about poverty [9].

Notes

1. The term 'people on low incomes' or 'participants' (when mentioning those involved in workshops) will be used throughout this paper rather than alternatives such as 'people experiencing poverty' or 'poor people', which have a more subjective meaning. The exception to this is when quoting from the workshops, when we use the words participants themselves used.

2. Thompson, J and Castell, S, (2007) Understanding attitudes to poverty in the UK: getting the public's attention, www.jrf.org.uk/bookshop/details.asp?pubID=86

3. In Derry, 'stokes' is a derogatory name widely used about people in poverty and originating from a popular surname among travellers.

4. 'Wains' is used mainly by people in parts of Northern Ireland to refer to children.

5. Such as the poverty-awareness toolkit being developed by the Northern Ireland Anti-Poverty Network.

6. Polly Toynbee and David Cameron have also used the metaphor of travelling through a desert to describe society. Toynbee used the analogy in 2003 in her book Hard Work: Life in Low Paid Britain. Cameron used it in an interview with the Daily Telegraph: 'Greg Clark I think was absolutely right to use the image of the caravan moving across the desert. That is a great metaphor for how we should think of poverty.' (Daily Telegraph, 2 December 2006 http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/migrationtemp/1535774/The-full-transcript-of-Cameron%27s-interview.html)

7. Interestingly, this was the only context in which class was raised.

8. With the exception of one participant in Nottingham, who was extremely enthusiastic about all British politicians and in particular the Prime Minister and his ideas for promoting 'Britishness.'

9. David Beckham was specifically mentioned.

Further areas of research

The findings from this report will be of interest to those working on anti-poverty policies, delivering services which are used by those living in poverty, or involved in communicating messages about poverty It is necessarily the case that many of the conclusions reached are tentative, and that there were ideas and issues raised which would repay further research. The following list of such areas for further work is not exhaustive, but includes some of the themes which participants themselves felt would benefit from being investigated more fully.

- Comparing the attitudes to poverty of front-line workers (especially teachers) and parents.

- Poverty awareness training for teachers and primary school children.

- As services become more community-led, ways of making the language used evolve in order to avoid alienation and stigmatisation.

- Trying to find images which meet people's very different ideas of what poverty looks like.

- Further examples of different kinds of stories which the media could tell about poverty, which would interest a mass audience and challenge negative attitudes about poverty.

- The use of 'grassroots' reporters to convey information about poverty, possibly making use of new opportunities such as web 2.0 (social networking) technologies and so on.

- Looking at which images would best convey the message that people in poverty aren't 'others' who can safely be ignored, and considering how 'shock' stories about poverty can contain a message about what can be done about the problem.

- Use of metaphors which people 'get' and which help to explain the reality of poverty – images, analogies with sport, travel etc.

- Investigating the extent to which there is a common understanding of what the 'miracle society' looks like, i.e. a society free from poverty and possible implications in terms of communication of UK poverty.

- Dialogue between politicians and people experiencing poverty about the way that politicians talk about poverty.

Appendices

Appendix A: Participants

A total of 68 people took part in the six workshops; 21 were men and 47 were women; 18 were black or minority ethnic and 50 were white British or Irish. All participants were over the age of 18; 10 were over the age of 60, and 17 were under the age of 30.

Appendix B: Workshop details and programme outline

Coffee on arrival

10.45   Local contact: welcome and housekeeping. Introduces Teresa.

11.00   Purpose and aims for the day, background and context. Clear outputs required from the day (what is expected from everyone).
Value of contributions. Introduction of other facilitators.

11.20   Process for the day, some guidelines to help progress,
Introductions in groups. Note on having an enjoyable day.
(Introductions – name and organisation/group plus how many forms of transport did you take to get to this meeting?)

11.25   In groups:
First exercise: What do you think people mean when they talk about poverty in the UK?
A quick ten words chosen to describe your thoughts.

A quick review of this exercise for the full group: lets everyone know how the exercises work and what the facilitators are looking for.

11.40   **Into school task**
If you were going into a school to tell primary or secondary school children about being 'poor' how would you suggest going about it? What expressions would you use? What would be the top three messages you'd want those children to leave with? If the children thought they were poor, what words do you think they would use to describe their lives?

Standby exercise 1: The youth worker
A friend of mine who works with young people recently asked them why their youth club got so much funding and why they had been given a youth worker to help them? They had no idea. She told them that it was because the government had decided that they were living in a deprived area and were therefore deprived. They were shocked. What does deprived mean to you? How would you tell those young people what deprived means? Are there better ways of describing their situation?

or

Standby exercise 2: The researcher
A colleague of Teresa's needs to do some research in an area regarded as deprived and wants the local community to participate in the research but he would like to attract people to the project without sounding disrespectful and patronising. What language might he use for his explanatory leaflet and in his conversation?

12.15   Quick check with the whole group. Outline of what achieved so far.
Check the enjoyment level.
Value of content.
Willingness of groups to continue. Any changes required?

12.30 LUNCH – sharing and networking (very relaxed)

13.15 Move everyone into new groups. Quick introductions again and the extra question: 'What is the phrase that politicians, newspapers, TV newsreaders use that really annoys you?'

Newspaper exercise

If a journalist from a national paper came to your door and asked you to tell them what poverty meant, what would you say? How would you prefer your story to be portrayed in the paper? What photographs would or wouldn't be suitable?

Show some photographs used by papers and ask the group for comments – what they think is appropriate or not for the media to use.

14.00 ### Miracle question

If a miracle happened overnight and your lives changed dramatically for the better – in the morning what would be different? What would be different about you, your family and friends, your community, day-to-day activities? How would others see you?

14.30 ### Poverty issues exercise

Many organisations work on poverty issues. Their role is to get public support and the issues they are interested in onto the government's agenda. If you were doing this work what would you include in your campaign? (Cup of tea during this exercise.)

15.00 ### The politician question

Teresa and Dan read out two speeches by current politicians (not saying who they are until after comments have been made). What does the group think of the words being used and their meaning?

How would you prefer to hear your MP talking about these issues on behalf of your constituency? What language and image should he/she include to make it real and respectful?

The metaphor exercise

What is the metaphor for your life and/or your community? Mine is like a cowboy and a horse training farm. If your life and your community were in the desert for example or in any environment of your choice – e.g. a circus, a band, on the moon, a pond – what would your lives look like? How would you be living your lives, what would be the most important things happening? How would you be living? What would life be like day-to-day? What would the problems be, what would the good things be?

Once you have fleshed out the picture, are you able to relate it back to your real lives? Are the problems similar or very different? Are the opportunities similar or different? What are the main things that have come up in the exercise that you think are interesting?

15.30 Review of the day's work. Evaluation information from participants. Summary: what will happen to this work now and why participation has been so valuable.

16.00 Big thank you and goodbyes.

Notes

communicating poverty report