

# Building public support for eradicating poverty in the UK

Findings  
Informing change

July 2009

Public support is needed to ensure that the Government and other organisations take action to tackle poverty in the UK. The perception of poverty is often misguided, with people believing that it is a result of laziness, or an inevitable part of modern life. The aim of this research is to identify ways of changing such perceptions and building public support for addressing the problem.

## Key points

- There are very few initiatives that actively and explicitly set out to build public support for government action to eradicate poverty in the UK.
- Formal assessments of the impact of activity to engage the public with the poverty agenda are rare, but most organisations hold some information on their achievements.
- UK poverty-related activity appears to be more effective in changing perceptions and behaviour than in changing attitudes.
- Using the term 'poverty' is not very successful in getting people to engage with the issue. Focusing on a specific aspect of poverty, such as wage levels, housing conditions or debt, is more likely to work.
- When using the term 'poverty', it is important to clarify what it means and help the audience understand the realities of living in poverty. They need to identify with people below the poverty line.
- Targeting groups by a common interest, job or locality enables organisations to reach individuals who have little awareness or knowledge of UK poverty.
- Real-life stories and messages about a specific injustice with a clear solution can be effective in changing perceptions, but do not necessarily build support for sometimes unpopular anti-poverty policy measures.

## The research

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# Introduction

Poverty in the UK is a particularly challenging issue. Although it would be difficult to find anyone who did not support the idea of tackling genuine poverty, explanations of why poverty still exists, and how to deal with it, are contested and political.

This research identifies a number of interesting initiatives to address poverty, but also uncovers useful evidence about what is not happening. It forms part of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's programme on public interest in poverty issues.

## Focus of current anti-poverty initiatives

There are very few examples of initiatives that actively and explicitly set out to build public support for action on UK poverty, in particular for potentially unpopular policy measures such as increases in benefit levels for workless individuals. Instead, activity centres on:

- providing people with information about levels of poverty in the UK and about what it means to live in poverty in the UK – without giving a clear message about what they should do with this information;
- campaigning on particular measures or policies to help poor people, but focusing on specific groups of people living in poverty for whom the public is perceived to have more sympathy, such as children and those on low wages. Most campaigns aim to achieve policy change rather than address public attitudes; they often focus on *demonstrating* rather than *building* public support;
- encouraging organisations to put poverty higher up on their agenda – the focus tends to be on what organisations can do rather than challenging the attitudes of the public.

Some examples of initiatives to build support for eradication of poverty in the UK are:

- voluntary sector campaigns, such as End Child Poverty;
- anti-poverty strategies or commissions set up by local authorities and their partners, such as the Scottish Borders Challenge document or the London Child Poverty Commission;
- benefit entitlement campaigns, such as Help the Aged's Winter Deaths campaign;

- media campaigns warning people against exploitation, such as the *Daily Mirror's* loan sharks campaign;
- the introduction of an advocacy role on UK poverty in the public sector, such as the Child Poverty Unit.

## Measuring the impact of initiatives to build public support

Formal assessments of the impact of activity to engage the public with the issue of UK poverty are rare. However, most organisations that work in this area hold some information that can be used to evaluate the impact of their activities. This often includes information such as the number of people taking part in an activity or the level of media coverage generated. Many organisations also possess anecdotal evidence about the results of their activities, but this evidence tends not to be recorded or collated and is in danger of being lost when relevant personnel leave the organisation.

## What do initiatives to build public support achieve?

It is difficult to establish a 'theory of change' when trying to build support for the UK poverty agenda – changes in perceptions do not automatically lead to changes in behaviour or attitudes. Few organisations try to establish theories of change. UK poverty activity appears to be fairly effective when it comes to changing perceptions (awareness) and behaviour, but less so when it comes to changing attitudes (ways of thinking).

- Perceptions – organisations reported almost without fail that their audiences react to information about UK poverty by saying that they had not previously realised how harsh the reality is. In a campaign context, reactions go beyond surprise to reveal real shock or outrage against a particular injustice.
- Behaviour – examples of behaviour change include people being encouraged to sign a petition, participate in a poverty-related event, volunteer, donate money or offer in-kind support. Numbers of people reached can vary from a few individuals to several thousand.
- Attitudes – although one should be careful when putting forward arguments derived from silence (i.e. lack of information), there is far less evidence of UK poverty-related activity resulting in a change in attitude among audiences.

## Audience engagement – what works?

Use of the term ‘poverty’ can be problematic when first trying to catch the attention of an audience. Often people do not understand its relevance to the UK, to their jobs or to their lives. More effective engagement methods include:

- approaching the issue indirectly – presenting the poverty message in a format that does not at first appear to have anything to do with UK poverty such as the tabloid-style free newspaper ‘New Londoners’ celebrating diversity in London;
- focusing on a specific poverty-related issue that people find easier to understand and relate to, such as wage levels, debt or homelessness;
- using a champion – identifying someone who is passionate about and committed to tackling poverty and is willing and able to convince people to engage with the UK poverty agenda.

Other lessons relating to audience engagement include:

- *Have a clear targeting strategy* – organising events that are open to the general public is likely to attract mainly people who are already interested in the issue. Targeting specific groups not on the basis of their attitudes towards UK poverty, but on a particular interest or activity they have in common (for example, social workers, London commuters, football fans), can offer an opportunity to engage people with varying levels of awareness, interest or support for the UK poverty agenda.
- *Undertake proactive outreach* – go out to the target audience rather than waiting for them to discover the campaign, the materials or activities that are taking place, and make it easy for people to engage.
- *Use a mix of engagement techniques* – different approaches can be used to reach different target audiences. Techniques as varied as YouTube or Google advertisements, lesson plans for schools and offering freebies (such as thermometers in the context of Help the Aged’s Winter Deaths campaign) in return for engagement can all be effective.

The budget that is available for an activity does not dictate how many individuals will be reached, but there does appear to be a link between financial and staff resources and the breadth and variety of engagement techniques used.

## Other general principles to guide activity

### *Real-life stories*

The research confirms the power of real-life stories. There is consistent, if anecdotal, evidence that real-life stories often lead to surprise about how widespread or challenging poverty is. Statistics may similarly surprise people, but they do not prompt such a strong emotional response. When targeting officials or politicians, real-life stories may strengthen their resolve to take action against poverty or even possibly change their position on policy measures. Real-life stories do not, however, appear to build support for specific policy measures among the wider public.

### *Solution-based messages*

In a campaign context, messaging about a specific problem with a clear solution works. Audiences want to see that the problem can be solved and want to be part of something that will lead to a positive outcome. Messages about injustices that are so obvious that they do not need to be spelled out are particularly effective. For example, the difference in wages of cleaning staff in football clubs and the star footballers highlight extreme inequalities. Messages about the people living in poverty for whom the public is perceived to have more sympathy – children, people in low-paid work, pensioners – are easier to sell, especially when these individuals can be cast against a ‘villain’. Messaging that does not undermine the audience’s own interest or, better still, anti-poverty proposals that are likely to also benefit the audience, appear to be significantly more effective. For example, everybody seemed likely to gain something from the campaign against the introduction of water charges in Northern Ireland. This presents organisations addressing poverty with a dilemma – some of the more unpopular messages are arguably the ones where most activity is required; however, these messages are perceived as going against the interests of audiences, for example messages about increasing benefit levels.

### *Helping audiences understand poverty*

When moving beyond specific solution-focused campaigns, there is a clear need to engage in a dialogue and explore what ‘poverty’ really means. The messenger needs to make poverty relevant, giving examples of the implications of poverty for daily life to help the audience *understand* poverty. Use of budget tools, where the audience is asked to make the kind of budget allocation decisions a person living in poverty would have to make, can be effective – the audience almost inevitably decides that the available income is not enough for daily needs.

In the context of organisational engagement, starting from the organisation's remit and priorities and showing how the poverty agenda links with this remit appears to be the way forward.

Showing that people living in poverty are not different from people who are better off can be quite effective. There appears to be a tendency to forget that people on either side of the poverty line are fundamentally the same, and reconnecting audiences with this truth is necessary. Volunteering can be a useful mechanism to achieve this.

## Conclusion

### *Voluntary sector*

The research finds that there is scope for closer working partnerships in the voluntary sector, in particular between the different anti-poverty networks and voluntary sector organisations involved in issue-specific campaigns. The success of the latter lies in their reach (up to several thousand individuals), while the added value of the former lies in the fact that they go beyond messages that are easy to sell to audiences. There is also scope for the voluntary sector to pay closer attention to the valid concerns of people who are not in favour of an increase in wage, support or benefit levels – rather than dismissing these concerns as stereotypical of individuals who do not realise what it is like to live on benefit or the minimum wage. Importantly, the voluntary sector should aim to be more explicit in terms of whether or not it is aiming to build public support and, if so, exactly which perceptions, behaviours or attitudes of which groups it is aiming to address.

### *Government messaging and funding*

The research further suggests that the Government should pay closer attention to its messaging on UK poverty, including implicit messaging in the context of benefit fraud campaigns. Relevant government bodies and other potential funding bodies are encouraged to consider funding elements of UK poverty activity that have the potential to build public support. Changing public attitudes is difficult, but this does not mean that public attitudes should remain unchallenged. For example, there is scope for more funding for poverty awareness training, empowerment of people living in poverty, the promotion of volunteering opportunities in deprived areas, possibly core funding for the different anti-poverty networks and funding to help track and monitor achievements.

## About the project

The research consisted of a wide-ranging consultation, based on interviews with 100 UK organisations involved in poverty-related activity. These included third sector (voluntary and community) organisations, companies, funding bodies, government departments and local authorities. On the basis of this consultation, 29 in-depth case studies were undertaken.

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## For further information

The full report, **Building public support for eradicating poverty in the UK**, by Joke Delvaux and Sini Rinne, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. It is available as a free download from [www.jrf.org.uk](http://www.jrf.org.uk).

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Published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, The Homestead, 40 Water End, York YO30 6WP. This project is part of the JRF's research and development programme. These findings, however, are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Foundation. ISSN 0958-3084

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