

BUILDING A FAIRER FUTURE

Looking Back, Moving Forward...

Report from the EY2010 event held in Southwark, London on 16 November 2010



The aim of this report is to highlight the main **ISSUES** raised during the event as an impetus for **ACTION** from participants and their organisations in the **fight against poverty and social exclusion** in the UK.

There is a risk that the recent cuts in government and local authority spending will have a disproportionate impact on people already experiencing poverty and disadvantage. Those among us who are committed to building a fairer future for all need to **join forces** to ensure that the **most vulnerable are protected** and **raise the voices of the marginalised.**



Key speakers, panellists, workshop facilitators and participants at the event highlighted the extent of the challenge we are facing but also outlined ways to **take action, influence policy makers, change attitudes** and **have our say.**

❖ A True Picture of Poverty in the UK



Cllr Peter John is leader of [Southwark Council](#), a Labour-led council that champions many **initiatives to fight against poverty, inequality and exclusion** in this diverse and densely populated South London borough. **Regeneration** projects in deprived areas and the piloting of **free school meals** in all primary schools are among the Council's top priority areas for action. Recognising the key role of the **voluntary and community sector** in this field, the Council supported this European Year event and also provides funding to **build the capacity** of local organisations.

Kate Wareing from [Oxfam](#) gave a statistics and case-study based exposition of [poverty in the UK](#). Awareness of **regional inequalities**, the impact of poverty on **health**, the role of **gender**, the extreme exclusion of **asylum seekers** and **media misrepresentation** were key issues. Kate showed examples of headlines describing those living on benefits as 'feckless cheats', contributing to the **perception of an 'undeserving poor'**. The need to **recognise poverty and its social effects** was stressed as vital given proposed **cuts to**



services, jobs and benefits that may well **exacerbate current levels of poverty.**

Grassroots Voices

“Poverty is telling my whole life story over and over again, just to get what I am entitled to.”

The event aimed to bring those with **direct experience of poverty and exclusion** into dialogue with policy makers, voluntary, private and public sector workers. Many of these participants highlighted the fact that their **knowledge and experience was unrecognised and undervalued.**

Grassroots representatives from [ATD Fourth World](#), [St. Giles Trust](#) and [KUC](#) in Merseyside spoke of **what poverty means to them every day** - feeling **misunderstood, misrepresented, isolated** and often let down by those meant to help them.

They called for a shift to **recognising the potential of each individual** and giving people the **opportunity to make a positive contribution** by **using their own experiences to help improve society** and bring people out of poverty and away from exclusion.

“There is such a huge amount of money spent on poverty yet it persists. It is time we turned to the true experts to find out how to overcome these issues.”

“If we aren't given a voice how will policy makers ever understand our perspective?”



During a Question Time panel discussion, the challenge of **positive engagement with the media** was tackled with some successful examples brought by **Rob Owen**, CEO of [St Giles Trust](#), and organisations from the East Midlands. The issue of **responsible journalism** was explored by [Amelia Gentleman](#) of the [Guardian](#) who described her own research and attempt to **portray the real lives** behind current policy changes and their effect on social exclusion.

Mainstream media is just one of many means to enable the voices of those in poverty to be heard. [The Roles We Play: Recognising the Contribution of People in Poverty](#), a collection of photographs by [Eva Sajovic](#), was also exhibited in the main hall. These portraits explore the roles played by those living in poverty within their families, communities and society at large with the aim of to **highlighting their efforts** and **challenging the negative attitudes** often held towards vulnerable and excluded families in the UK.



In preparation for the event, local people from all walks of life had auditioned to form the dance group **TREASURE** and they brought along a poignant **visual interpretation of the meaning of poverty.** Their participation was made possible with the support of EAPN England and the [Big Lottery Awards for All](#) programme.

❖ Change Brings Challenge



[Simon Hughes](#), local MP and Deputy Leader of the Liberal Democrats, took questions from concerned participants and committed himself to a **follow-up meeting** with ATD Fourth World.

The change in government has brought with it a massive **transformation of the political landscape** in just a few months. With more to come in the form of **cuts in spending and welfare reform**, concerns were raised on a number of related issues throughout the day.

HOT TOPICS

Concerns over the **delivery of Universal Credit - sanctions** for those who fail to find work or participate in **'workfare' schemes - Housing Benefit Caps - ATOS work capability assessments** for Employment Support Allowance claimants – poor quality of **Jobcentre Plus** service - **funding cuts** to advice agencies, voluntary and community sector, service providers - **the (un)fairness of cuts**, the deficit having been caused mainly by **laissez-faire government policy** and **irresponsible banking** - the **meaning of 'Big Society'** – impact of proposed **tuition fee increases** for students from low-income families

ACTION POINTS:

- Conduct **participatory research** into the **potential effects of spending cuts** and continue working to **raise awareness of the realities** of poverty. Build on our diverse experience to show how cuts will negatively affect peoples' lives and cause greater long-term social damage.
- Campaign for the rights of and **involvement of people experiencing poverty** ("service users") in **developing policy and practice** that directly affects them. Lobby councillors and politicians, through **community engagement** (Tenants and Residents' Associations, for example), **protest and petitioning**.
- Given the cuts to advice agencies, councils need to work in **partnership** with organisations and agencies to **disseminate relevant information** and to solicit the needs of local communities (one workshop suggested a local 'census').
- Conduct research into how government budgets can be most **effectively spent**. For example, one participant spoke of how unsuitable many of the training courses or job offers are for someone with an illness like hers - services must be **individually tailored to each person's potential**.
- Recognise and develop the **vital role played in communities** by the so-called "work-shy" and the money this can save the public purse if they are given adequate resources to do so. **People don't want handouts, just to be able to help themselves.**

❖ Dealing with Debt and Financial Inclusion

Concerns about the proposed **Universal Credit** scheme were expressed by participants, in particular the **fear of overspending** if recipients are not given support in managing their money. The daily **stress of budgeting, fear of debt, lack of control** over income and spending and ways to **support people with finances** were all raised in various workshops and speeches.



London Mutual
Credit Union

The workshop **Working Together to Tackle Debt** looked at co-operation between agencies to promote **financial inclusion** at a community level. The **Southwark Financial Inclusion Forum** (co-ordinated by [Southwark Legal Advice Network](#) - SLAN) was launched in 2007 and brings together Southwark Council departments, advice and community agencies, housing associations, [London Mutual Credit Union](#) (LMCU) and the [Consumer Financial Education Body](#) (CFEB). They aim to help households work through their arrears and keep their homes by providing **debt advice, financial education** and **access to low-cost credit**. The current demand for their service is high as **recession** has led to **increased poverty and debt** in the borough. Participants identified a great number of **causes of debt** but the workshop also identified **solutions and achievements** including multi-agency working, like in the Southwark Financial Inclusion Forum; **breaking down stereotypes** such as “*credit unions are for poor people*” and **increasing awareness and membership** of LMCU. The risky lending behaviours of financial institutions that have recently come under the spotlight, provide an opportunity to promote the **vital role that credit unions can play** in encouraging people to save and borrow responsibly.

The [KUC](#) (Kirkby Unemployed Centre) workshop, **Debt on our Doorstep**, also highlighted the role of credit unions in **countering the actions of loan sharks** and private lenders whose predatory



practices, combined with low incomes, lead people into spiralling debt with significant social and emotional ramifications. They run a programme to **educate young people** about money matters and to encourage their inclusion in **money management** at a young age. Although credit unions operate at a local level and thus cannot be advertised nationally, it was recommended that financial topics be made a part of the **National Curriculum** so that by educating young people, financial exclusion can be prevented.



These workshops included **interactive examples** of how financial education might work, such as a discussion on **how to prioritise debts** or overcome barriers to **opening a bank account**. Other means to try and reach out to those most in need included SLAN/Southwark FIF's **drop-in session** on the first Tuesday of each month at [Bermondsey Citizen's Advice Bureau](#), distributing **leaflets** to local residents who may not have access to the internet and **training voluntary peer mentors and community groups** to fill gaps in service provision.

ACTION POINTS:

- Lobby to **cap interest rates** charged by doorstep lenders and **increase regulation**.
- **Encourage reporting** of illegal and high interest-charging lenders to local [Illegal Money Lending Teams](#).
- Lobby for **government subsidies** to increase the number of, and participation in, **credit unions nationwide** (membership has risen fivefold to over 50,000 since the Welsh Assembly has championed the [Credit Union](#) movement).
- **Community education** in different languages about debt and financial services that recognises and combats barriers to access (shame of debt, literacy problems with form-filling etc).
- Maintaining **advice services** on debt, benefits, legal issues, housing etc.
- **Networking** between bodies that provide services and those that campaign on local and national levels on welfare issues.

❖ Access to Services and Support

During the afternoon panel discussion, the issue of funding cuts was high on the agenda. Potential **cuts to front-line services, poverty programmes and outreach work** were all criticised as they risk **reducing the number, and quality, of vital services** for the most vulnerable.

Many organisations and individuals expressed real doubt about their **capacity to continue their work** should certain cuts be approved. **Rob Owen** of St Giles Trust highlighted the increasing difficulty of securing funds for their work in the **rehabilitation of ex-offenders** and the **increasing fundraising burden** on councils and community organisations. The **diversity of organisations** represented gave an impressive view of the work being done with people experiencing a whole range of difficulties related to poverty and social exclusion. However, the **insecurity of the current climate** and the risk of significant losses of staff and resources **posed a threat** to such important work.

Suggestions were raised as to how organisations and those living in poverty could counter these threats themselves, highlighting the **importance of sharing skills, resources and examples of best practice**. Potential solutions in the form of **increased collaboration** were highlighted by [Community Action Southwark](#) in the **Working Together to Provide Support** workshop, which gave examples of the different ways organisations can **maximise resources and avoid duplicating services**. The [Mentoring and Befriending Foundation](#) introduced ways in which **mentoring and befriending** could be used to potentially support people experiencing poverty and exclusion to **identify**



and guarantee access vital services, a type of support which becomes more and more necessary as provision is reduced.

At the same time, the **achievements of organisations and community groups** acting independently of government were also recognised. **Mubin Haq** gave the example of his work for [Trust for London](#), whose independence from government spending gives them the **freedom to support** what may be politically unpopular and innovative approaches to **reducing poverty** and **supporting communities**. He also called into question how a voluntary and community sector with diminished capacity will be able to face the **challenges of increased need** for service provision and **infrastructure to support volunteering** put forward in the [Big Society](#).

On the topic of **employment services**, [London Voluntary Sector Training Consortium](#) (LVSTC) led a workshop discussing the **potential effect of changes** to how the [European Social Fund](#) is distributed in the UK. The Department of Work and Pensions, for instance, promises **support for the long-term unemployed** through the **Work Programme** but will only award contracts to large organisations, leaving smaller and voluntary organisations reliant on sub-contracting their services to larger partners. Direct access to ESF funding for **small organisations actively engaged in promoting social inclusion** is becoming more and more limited.

In their workshop, [Community Links](#) looked in more detail at the **quality of service for clients** of Jobcentre Plus and other employment service providers. At listening events held across the country, people had expressed **dissatisfaction** with the service that they receive and the **level of training** that frontline staff require in order to build a constructive relationship with clients that experience many difficulties and have complex lives.



ACTION POINTS:

- Lobby government to take a **long-term view of spending** and explore **alternatives to the cuts**; drastic cuts could be considered a [false economy](#) as they will lead to higher costs further down the line (health, crime, unemployment etc.)
- Raise awareness of projects such as Community Links' [Deep Value](#) that research the importance of **quality one-to-one relationships in public services** that enable people to articulate their own needs and have them met.
- Promote low cost invest-to-save strategies such as **staff training** for those who **deliver the services people in poverty rely on**. For example, ATD Fourth World's [poverty awareness training](#) module is delivered by social service users in an attempt to sensitise newly qualified social workers to the impact of poverty on their lives and how to engage with families.
- Build **more efficient working practices**, such as greater cross-agency **co-operation in service delivery**, and thus effectiveness in delivering outcomes; **more joined-up services** may help mitigate the worst impact of budget cuts.

❖ Participating in Change

Jean Lambert is a [Green Party MEP](#) and spoke about the part **social inclusion** plays in the [Europe 2020](#) strategy. She urged **organisations to involve themselves** in influencing how national **indicators and targets** to reduce poverty are identified.



The [European Anti-Poverty Network](#) (EAPN) in England works to **increase the participation of people in poverty and their organisations** in European and UK policy to combat poverty and social exclusion. **EAPN England** held their AGM at the event and encouraged

organisations and individuals present to **join the network**. Their aim is to bring people and local organisations together, find out what does or does not work and **how things can be done better**. The network is also about **giving local organisations a voice** - at both national and European level - in the decision making that affects them. In the panel discussion, **Katherine Duffy** from EAPN emphasised the need for organisations to **pay attention to what happens at European policy level**, even if it seems to be far away and irrelevant, as there are both **dangers and opportunities present** that will ultimately impact on people living in poverty in their daily lives. Here and throughout the day, the issue of **continuity beyond EY2010** was raised and how organisations must support each other in facing tough times for many.

"I try to do things in my community and volunteer... I also help my mum and my agoraphobic partner, supporting them to live independently and with dignity. This saves the state thousands in nurses' visits, carers and home help."

Workshops explored the issue of how to **engage those in poverty in political dialogue and community action** to create conditions of democracy. Participants highlighted the need to **change the perceptions** of people in poverty held by those in positions of power. **Barriers to participation** included travel costs, scepticism of 'the system' and the demands of supporting a family. **'Enablers'** were also identified, such as creating an informal atmosphere, publicising well and in advance and having clear outcomes. Organisations like ATD Fourth World gave examples of where they had managed to **create the conditions for participation** and subsequently **effect changes in policy** - though the process may be slow, the committed engagement

of people in poverty and organisations is vital if the status quo is to be challenged. In order for this to happen, sensitive work needs to be done to **help 'grassroots voices' be heard**, giving people confidence and the opportunity to speak to those in decision-making roles.



Southwark Council's [Community Engagement Division](#) has a dedicated team to **encourage involvement** in the local community and democracy and is looking for ways to encourage more participation from **under-represented**

groups. They joined forces to run the workshop **Engaging People in the Community** with the [Southwark Volunteer Centre](#) whose [Active Citizens Hub](#) supports people to become involved in the community and take part in decisions that affect them. They gave examples of how to **build relationships** and reach those usually excluded from discussion, such as regular 'Café Conversations' for people with learning difficulties and used to discuss safety issues with police and other agencies, that could be a way to overcome the exclusion of other **under-represented groups** such as women and ethnic minorities.

ACTION POINTS:

- **Create forums for continuing dialogue** between people experiencing poverty and their organisations, public and private sector workers, policy makers and elected officials. **Joined up thinking** and **joint action** at local, regional or national level can produce **innovative policy and practice** grounded in the realities of people's experience.
- **Build networks of knowledge and practice** between organisations; shared information and more partnerships will **improve the chances of securing vital funding** for community outreach, family support, research and campaigns. The [LVSTC partnership portal](#), for example, has been set up to assist organisations to **establish partnerships for funding applications**.
- Use the **infrastructure of existing networks** to support volunteering and community engagement, such as [volunteer centres](#), create the conditions to encourage the involvement of excluded groups and **increase the participation of people experiencing poverty** in the community and local decision making.
- 2011 is the [European Year of Volunteering](#) so **TAKE ACTION** and **GET INVOLVED!**

Photographs by [Bex Singleton](#) and ATD Fourth World

**Reporting by ATD Fourth World
with thanks to all the co-organisers, funders
speakers & contributing organisations**

Southwark Council * LVSTC * EAPN England

Cambridge House * St Giles Trust * KUC * Oxfam GB

Community Action Southwark * Southwark Legal Advice Network * Community Links

Mentoring and Befriending Foundation * Trust for London * Big Lottery Awards for All

