Poverty2solutions: reflections from collaborative research rooted in the expertise of experience on poverty

Tracey Herrington, traceyherrington@thrive-teesside.org.uk
Thrive Teessde, UK

Ruth Patrick, ruth.patrick@york.ac.uk
University of York, UK

Sue Watson, info@doleanimators.org.uk
Dole Animators, UK

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Introduction

“People with direct experience of poverty are best able to comment on the difficulties they face. We are skilled and able to gather data, comment on effective ways of working and fully understand the impact of policies on us. Not wanting to be seen as part of the problem, we want the opportunity to feed into effective solutions” (Dylan Eastwood, member of Poverty2Solutions & Thrive Teesside)

The problems of poverty and insecurity are much written about in this journal and elsewhere, with academics, commentators and journalists charting the extent of poverty that we face in the UK, and the consequences this has for affected households and wider society. What is so often missing, though, is a real and sustained engagement with people who have direct experiences of the problems of which academics and commentators write – those who we here describe as ‘experts by experience’ – people who have lived experiences of poverty and social security receipt. This article is a collaborative effort to explore an alternative approach, with each of the authors having a different form of expertise on poverty (as a facilitator of a community group...
(Herrington), as someone with direct experience of social security (Watson) and as an academic (Patrick)).

In this article, we outline our experiences working together on a project called ‘Poverty2Solutions’, which has set out to challenge some of the traditional ways of working when gathering information and conducting research with (but all too often on) people and communities experiencing poverty. Instead, Poverty2Solutions has sought to draw upon the expertise of people in poverty to develop policy ideas and solutions that could make a meaningful difference to their and others’ lives. This is about much more than promoting storytelling and the sharing of lived experiences, and is instead about harnessing the expertise in which these experiences are rooted for effective and transformative change.

First, we summarise our approach – what we did and why – before going on to share some key reflections from the project focusing on the possibilities (as well as the challenges) with the approach taken, and relevant lessons for wider policy and practice. In concluding, we argue that there is still a lot more to be done to include people with direct experience in policy discussions about poverty and social security and that – if done differently – this has the potential to be mobilised in incredibly effective and exciting ways.

The Poverty2Solutions project – visualising solutions to the problems we face

In the autumn of 2016, three groups with direct experiences of poverty (ATD Fourth World, Dole Animators and Thrive Teesside) came together with Ruth Patrick and graphic designer, Dan Farley, to produce visual blueprints of their ideas for addressing poverty and insecurity in the UK. In these workshops, each group worked with Dan and Ruth to think through what policy changes and reforms would be most effective in efforts to solve (or at least reduce) poverty. We used visual tools and design-led methods as a way to open up discussions, break down power differentials and think about what the changes we were suggesting would look like. For example, group members developed storyboards of what it feels like to be in poverty (and then developed contrasting storyboards that explored what the absence of poverty would look and feel like). As proposals for change were developed, we worked together to create visual illustrations of each proposal and to explore how best to represent the changes that the group were seeking. We found this use of visuals (both as a method to encourage discussion and as a focus for dissemination and outputs) an effective way to encourage co-production and provide a space where people could collectively think ambitiously and idealistically about a different future.

The overarching objective was to come up with co-produced visual summaries of the reforms each group suggested, which would be accessible and capable of being widely shared. The final visual blueprints (see Figures 1–3) achieve this and are a source of pride to each group, who have all used them in their wider activities and in talking to various audiences and stakeholders about the changes needed to halt the rising tide of poverty in the UK. The blueprints were launched at an event at the House of Commons in July 2016, where the three groups also had a chance to come together and share their proposals with each other (as well as with broader audiences).
What was notable was that while each group produced their own proposals for change, and worked independently, there was a great deal of consensus both within groups when agreeing areas of change on which to focus, and also across the three groups. There was also notable common ground between what the groups proposed and the priorities for change highlighted by anti-poverty charities and campaigners (for example, there is crossover between the groups’ proposals and those set out by
the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in their Solve UK Poverty strategy (JRF, 2016). To build on this, further funding was secured for a second phase of work during which the groups came together to learn from one another and to explore the extent of the consensus both across the three groups and between the groups and other stakeholders.
on poverty such as the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (who funded this second phase of the project) and others with direct experiences of poverty.

This phase of consensus building identified some key areas for future work, which were identified as of particular significance for the communities in which each group within the Poverty2Solutions coalition are based. These include:
housing, the benefits system, employment, and ensuring that the voices of people with experiences of poverty are better included and valued in policymaking and debates. To this end, the most recent programme of work has seen Poverty2Solutions work closely with other experts to develop a concrete policy ask and objective around improving the engagement of people with direct experiences of poverty in policymaking.

This ask has been formalised as a desire and need for the enactment of Section One of the Equality Act 2010, which would see the introduction of a socio-economic duty. While the Act was passed by Parliament in 2010, the coalition government (with Theresa May as Home Secretary) refused to implement Section One of the Act (#1 for Equality, 2019; Poverty2solutions, 2019). This section of the Act was intended to introduce a socio-economic duty on public bodies, which would require them:

> ‘when making decisions of a strategic nature about how to exercise its functions [to] have due regard to the desirability of exercising them in a way that is designed to reduce the inequalities of outcome which result from socio-economic disadvantage’.

In plain English, this would require public authorities to consider and think through how the policy changes and decisions they make have an impact upon the inequalities that are the consequence of poverty and disadvantage, and the importance of trying to reduce these inequalities wherever possible. The intention behind the duty is to ensure that socio-economic inequality (and reducing this) is routinely considered in policymaking, something which has so often seemed absent in decisions of late at both the local and national level. Had the duty been in force during the Westminster Coalition’s 2010–15 programme of welfare reforms, for example, there would have been an opportunity to challenge policies such as the benefits cap and the two-child limit on the extent to which they appear not to pay any regard to their inevitably negative impacts on socio-economic disadvantage.

For a socio-economic duty to be meaningful, Poverty2Solutions also want to ensure that processes of monitoring and implementing the duty closely involve people with direct experiences of poverty, thus raising their level of engagement in the policymaking process. This has been encapsulated in Poverty2Solution’s ‘Do Your Duty for Equality’ campaign, which calls on all party leaders to commit to enacting the duty and to paying special regard to the involvement of people with lived experience within this. The campaign was launched with a high-profile event at the Labour Party Conference in Brighton in September 2019, which saw members of Poverty2Solutions, parliamentarians and commentators share a platform where each spoke in support of the duty. The campaign is supported by a co-produced briefing paper, a range of visual materials (including screen-printed tote bags, which the group members made together) and social media content (see Poverty2Solutions, 2019). As part of the campaign activities, the group has held several meetings with senior members of the UK shadow cabinet, written blogs and comment pieces (see Herrington, 2019) and spoken at conferences and events promoting the importance of the duty.
There are several elements of the Poverty2Solutions approach which are distinctive, and which are integral to the success of the project to date. These are:

- the use of arts-based and visual approaches to encourage discussion and aid dissemination, with participants playing an active part in the development of these visual elements;
- the merging of various forms of expertise, and bringing these diverse forms of expertise together to develop joint programmes of work. For example, in developing their policy ask Poverty2Solutions have worked closely with policy and poverty experts from organisations such as the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Child Poverty Action Group; and
- working hard to support the active participation of a diverse range of people with direct experiences of poverty (now and previously) by supporting full costs of participation and being fluid and flexible about levels of engagement.

The possibilities and challenges of working in this way

As authors, we have all played an active part in Poverty2Solutions and have found the work enjoyable, exhausting and exhilarating, but also frustrating at times. Here we draw out some key challenges and possibilities with the approach taken. First, bringing experts of experience together across different parts of the country and enabling conversations between diverse groups of experts by experience, and with other types of experts is valuable and has great untapped potential. This is because the conversations it enables can lead to new and exciting insights but also because those involved (most importantly experts by experience) can gain new skills and experiences, and this can lead to increased levels of self-confidence. Indeed, group members talk about how their involvement with the project has left them feeling more able to articulate their points of view to decision makers. This newly found confidence has seeped into other areas of group members’ lives, for example enabling them to challenge bad practice within the health services and holding their landlords to account for poor housing conditions. The skills and opportunities the work enabled for group members varied within and between groups and reflected the groups’ different starting points and varying levels of skills, experiences and history of working in collaborative and policy-focused ways. This links into a further challenge of this kind of approach: the importance but difficulty too in setting group work and activities so as to include everyone but also to keeping everyone stimulated and engaged.

What is important about bringing diverse forms of expertise together (in ways that are not dissimilar from the merging of knowledge approach pioneered by ATD Fourth World (Fourth World-University Research Group (2007))) is the extent to which it can lead to stronger evidence and recommendations for change which are rooted in diverse understandings and experiences. What has been notable in the Poverty2Solutions project is the ways in which it is possible to develop nuanced and well-evidenced policy recommendations for change, which reflect and draw upon a wide range of forms of expertise. This leads to better-informed proposals, which have been developed collaboratively and, as in the case with the socio-economic duty call, reflect both the priorities of people with direct experiences of poverty, and the perspective of campaigners and practitioners about where there is a realistic prospect of achieving change.
A further advantage of the collaborative approach is that individual group members report finding it valuable to hear the experiences of each other, and to share common experiences of poverty and frustrating interactions with the benefit system. There is comfort in realising from these interactions that one is not struggling alone. Group members are driven by the opportunities Poverty2Solutions provides to speak up in defence of those who are unable to and there is a shared understanding at meetings about the importance of challenging policymakers and politicians to create policies that better support the needs of families living in poverty. The meetings of the group are underpinned by principles of respect, and often full of energy, given the extent of people’s appetite to work together to try and generate social change.

Inevitably, though, this type of work is incredibly labour and time intensive, and it can be challenging to manage the expectations of those involved, especially where people want to see transformative change as a result of their involvement. Here, we have found that honesty is critical, as is a willingness to be ambitious and to try new things to reach new and wider audiences. Poverty2Solutions adopts a way of working that is expensive, and it is essential to recognise the high costs (in terms of financial resources, but also in time by all involved) of full and effective participation. This extends to ensuring that all the costs of participation are met (travel, subsistence and child care) and that participants are given gift vouchers after each meeting and/or session as a thank you for the time devoted to the project. Poverty2Solutions has been able to secure funding for each programme of work, but does not have sustainable funding into the longer-term. The demands of securing funding is not a small one, and there are special challenges in persuading academic funders of the benefits of this type of participatory, co-produced approach.

In making the case for participation in general and the Poverty2Solutions approach in particular, what is particularly important (and where we think there are lessons for others interested in poverty and social justice) is that the way this type of work begins from and is rooted in a reimagining of the relationship between academics and people with direct experiences of poverty. Too often, in the experiences of Thrive Teesside especially, academics can descend on groups with direct experience of poverty, take what they need (experiences, stories) and then walk away. On these occasions, this has served the academics self-interests (that is, to write their article, MA, PhD) but has left group members feeling bruised and disillusioned. There is a lack of sustained engagement, and those involved can be left feeling exploited and as if they were only wanted and useful for their stories.

By contrast, the Poverty2Solutions approach sees the academics involved (primarily Ruth Patrick) working to support and enable the group members who are themselves the key decision makers and driving forces behind the project’s direction and focus. Inevitably, dominant power differentials remain, but considerable time and thought has been invested in seeking to improve the balance of power as part of efforts to create an inclusive environment where everyone’s contribution is recognised and where there is space for all to engage in processes of collaboration. Working with visual approaches has been found to be effective in this regard, especially where the academics involved in the project (as was the case here) are neither comfortable nor familiar with working in visual ways. It is also useful for the academic partner to take on the role of host at meetings, and to take responsibility for ensuring that everyone has something to drink and eat, that cups of tea are refilled, and bowls of snacks replenished during workshops and sessions. What is also important is to be open.
to roles within a collaborative project shifting over time. This has occurred within Poverty2Solutions, where the academic role within the group has receded over time, and instead the researcher (Ruth Patrick) is now more likely to attend project meetings in a supportive capacity (if at all) with group members often managing the delivery of the meetings themselves. As relationships between group members and partners evolve, there is scope for the partnership to be strengthened, and this provides great potential where group members then become confident to hold each other (and the facilitators) to account, and can challenge each other where this is needed.

The Poverty2Solutions approach has already proved effective in so far as the group is now widely regarded as a key stakeholder in debates and policy discussions about poverty and social security. Notably, the Labour Party’s manifesto for the 2019 General Election included a commitment to create legislation to rule out discrimination on the basis of socio-economic disadvantage (Labour Party, 2019), something which the Poverty2Solutions coalition feel is a direct result of their lobbying and influencing activity. While efforts to engage policymakers with this work have had some important successes, it can still be very difficult to get an audience with parliamentarians, and it is especially difficult to have conversations with policymakers on the right of the political spectrum. This is a source of incredible frustration for the group, but it is something which we continue to try and challenge, and on which we are now working closely with partners at Joseph Rowntree Foundation to look at new ways to engage and open up conversations with policymakers across the political spectrum.

The work of Poverty2Solutions has also triggered new activities and programmes of work, both for group member organisations, but also for other groups who have been inspired by the approach taken. For example, the group have worked together to support ATD Fourth World’s research looking at developing a new way to measure poverty (ATD Fourth World, 2016), and Thrive Teesside have developed a new partnership with Just Fair to develop and support the Social Rights Alliance North East (Casla and Bonner, 2019). Further, the Dole Animators facilitated a zine making workshop to explore what a poverty free future might look like (see Dole Animators, 2018). Group members have also learned from each other’s approaches, and this has informed their own work at the local level.

Further, the efforts Poverty2Solutions have made (and continue to make) to work as a collective of three groups (across different parts of the country) has directly led to the formation of the APLE (Addressing Poverty Through Lived Experiences) collective. This new (and still in its infancy) network is aiming to bring groups together from different parts of the UK to address poverty, and to draw upon lived experiences of poverty to lobby for and inspire social change (see APLE, 2019).

Reflections on the Poverty2Solutions approach

The Poverty2Solutions approach draws upon a rich history of participatory research and participatory action research approaches. What is important is that it comes at a time when there seems to be a growing willingness and awareness of the importance of involving and valuing people with direct experiences of poverty in policy discussions, research, and wider media efforts to promote social change. While we welcome this shift, and are ourselves benefiting from it, the group members are sometimes concerned about the importance placed on ‘storytelling’, and people with direct experiences being asked to share their stories with policymakers and influencers (Saltmarshe, 2018). For
the group members, it is important to get beyond this and it should not be necessary or incumbent upon those with experience of poverty who want to engage in policy debates to ‘tell their story’ in order to get a seat at the table. This can be experienced as patronising and exploitative and as a reinforcing of (rather than a breaking down of) power differentials between those with experiences of poverty and policymakers. What group members value, and what the Poverty2Solutions approach makes possible, is being able to use experiences of injustice and poverty to offer tangible solutions that have the potential to have a real and positive impact on people’s lives.

At present, all too often, the expertise of experience is not employed in policymaking and we can see the poor policymaking this all too often engenders in cases such as the rollout of Universal Credit. This policy rollout has been governed by a ‘test and learn’ approach, which has seen piloting of the new benefit, and then (some) modifications made, while serious design issues and implementation problems remain. Had the architects of Universal Credit properly engaged with claimants from the outset, and talked to them about what would really help them, endemic shortcomings with the benefit (such as the five week wait before payments), might have been avoided and so too the resultant financial hardship for many thousands of families. There are exciting examples north of the border – in Scotland – of policymakers doing much more to listen to and engage with people with direct experiences of poverty and this is vitally important in all anti-poverty policymaking activities.

Here, there are very clear lessons for policymakers from the Scottish example, where – in regard to social security legislation – Experience Panels have been established (Scottish Government, 2019). These panels bring together people with experiences of the social security system and then use different methods (including, for example, surveys, small group discussions and workshops) to provide forums to explore elements of Scottish social security policymaking, implementation and delivery with panel members. More broadly, policymakers and stakeholders seeking to influence poverty need to widen their understanding of expertise to incorporate (and make sure there is meaningful engagement with) the expertise of experience on poverty and insecurity.

This requires much more than a cursory nod to consultation with affected populations to processes of policymaking that include conversations and active listening to the viewpoints and experiences of individuals whom such policies will affect. Enabling effective participation and involvement (especially in policymaking) is resource intensive, and policymakers need to be careful to ensure that the resource implications of effective participation are fully thought through and covered wherever possible. There are particular possibilities here to do much more to make calls for evidence to select committees and governmental enquiries more participatory, and to reform these important parliamentary mechanisms so they are open to a wider range of expertise.

The possibilities inherent within the Poverty2Solution approach and way of working apply both to the UK context, and internationally and there is especial possibilities here to do more to open up learning between groups of experts by experiences from different countries. All too often it is the academics and the professionals who travel to share their research findings and lessons from practice, and there is a need to create opportunities and mechanisms for international sharing and learning between groups of experts of experience as well, while also creating avenues for this form of expertise to be better valued and incorporated in existing international forums. ATD Fourth World have particular expertise to share here (see, for example, OECD, 2019), and
there have also been exciting developments within food insecurity research, where a recent international conference in America included a delegation of experts by experience from the UK (Closing the Hunger Gap Network, 2019).

Academics also have to think carefully about how they work with and engage with people with direct experiences of poverty. One of Poverty2Solutions’ member – Thrive Teeside – have started to work closely with academics to suggest principles for research with community groups and to prepare a compact, which sets out best practice. The compact is still in development, but principles would include a commitment to ensuring that research into people with experiences of poverty proceeds as an ethical partnership, with individuals living in poverty seen as partners in the research (rather than as subjects) and the research being conducted in a transparent and open way. Thrive (and the rest of the Poverty2Solutions group) would like to see much more research that is co-produced and participatory, and see academic researchers properly value and respect the expertise that people with experience bring. We believe that the Poverty2Solutions approach shows that such an approach is radical, but can be transformative, and a very enjoyable experience for all involved.

Conclusion

This brief article has set out the Poverty2Solutions approach and reflected upon some of the inherent challenges (but also possibilities) with working in this way. There is great potential in the collaborative, emancipatory approach detailed in this article, and we would like the opportunity for further conversations with policymakers and other stakeholders who would be interested to adopt elements of this approach, and to think about new and innovative ways to combine different forms of expertise.

In concluding, it is fitting to quote Kathleen Carter of Thrive, who herself quotes Ghandi in documenting her own involvement with the group and why she believes this kind of work is important, and will – in the long term – generate change:

“People with direct experience of poverty can be key active participants. No longer do we want to have things ‘done to us’, but we demand the respect and space to allow us to have the opportunities to be able to adopt a stakeholder position in relation to taking our solutions forward. We can have a significant role in making changes that have a real, sustainable impact – but this takes time and is reliant upon being provided with the space and opportunities for people to come together to build consensus. As quoted by Mahatma Ghandi: ‘First they ignore you. Then they laugh at you. Then they fight you. Then you win.’ We will not be ignored and we will rise up against all the adverse comments made. This is important to us – it is our lives and we will work with others to ensure we have a mandate to take action.”

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.
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