

When ends don't meet

Sustainable livelihoods in Thornaby on Tees

When ends don't meet is a new research report from Church Action on Poverty (CAP) and Oxfam's UK Poverty Programme (UKPP) which explores how men and women in Thornaby on Tees construct their livelihoods. The research is the first systematic attempt to use the 'Sustainable Livelihoods Approach' (SLA), commonly used in international development, within a UK context. The approach focusses on analysing people's own existing assets and how they use these to build a sustainable livelihood.

The research is based on detailed interviews with participants from 24 low income households carried out in the first half of 2006. The project worked with participants to understand what assets they have, and how they are getting by. The project also carried out some participatory research and an analysis of the local and regional economy. Thornaby is typical of many towns where, since the 1970s, the key industries have been declining, and inequality between areas has increased. Containing some of the poorest wards in England, it has been the focus of significant regeneration activity over the last few years. The research found that:

- For many people social networks were the strongest and most important assets they had, with dependence on friends and family standing out as a crucial element in their coping strategies.
- Many people had very few financial assets and for some, particularly lone parents, this was combined with high levels of unmanageable (often high interest rate) debt.
- The majority of the households in this study, and a high proportion of women (all but two in the survey) experienced mental health problems, especially depression. This had a big impact on their ability to earn and therefore to increase financial assets.
- Women were poorer than men. The reasons for this were complex, but included caring responsibilities, high levels of debt, mental ill-health, and low levels of vocational qualifications. Sometimes these factors were inter-related.
- Couples were better off than single people and lone parents. This is because they had more joint capacity for combining paid and unpaid work, and the potential to negotiate roles within the household, and therefore greater flexibility of labour leading to a better ability to weather external shocks.
- When public services were approachable and useful, both women and men benefited a great deal, but when staff were unsupportive and treated people without respect, it was very damaging to the individual's self-esteem and confidence.
- Sustainable Livelihoods Approach is a useful tool for understanding how people living in poverty make choices, and develop strategies in order to survive. An analysis of these survival strategies helps in identifying positive interventions to support men and women to develop a sustainable livelihood.

The Sustainable Livelihoods Approach

Poverty in the UK is often characterised as a combination of powerlessness and material deprivation, with the result that analyses of poverty often do not consider the assets and positive strategies that people experiencing poverty employ to overcome some of the obstacles in their lives.

The 'Sustainable Livelihoods Approach' analyses people's existing assets and how they use these to build a sustainable livelihood. These assets are divided into five main areas: financial, human, social, public and physical, which jointly create a composite picture of the life of a person within their household and community. This understanding is then considered in the light of the multitude of factors that have an effect on people's vulnerability to poverty, including household dynamics, local services and national policy. The approach includes a strong gender dimension looking at how women and men forge their livelihoods together and separately.

To help identify how secure, long term and effective people's strategies are for creating and preserving assets, the research categorised four stages: surviving, coping, adapting and accumulating (each of which has defining characteristics). One key factor is the extent to which a person's livelihoods strategy is able to withstand external shocks - events and situations beyond the control of the individual, such as relationship breakdown, bereavement, loss of a job, or even a cooker breaking. Together they form a 'livelihoods ladder' which people move up and down at different times in their lives. The aim of the project is to explore how people can move on from having a survival strategy to having a sustainable livelihood.

People's Assets

Financial assets

Overall, financial assets were the weakest, especially for single women and lone parents, with many people reliant on borrowing, and state benefits and experiencing poverty on a daily basis.

"At one point I couldn't summon enough energy to put out the wheely bin. I couldn't understand until a friend from church pointed out I hadn't eaten enough calories - I'd had a few days of just drinking tea til my money came through".

Women were the most likely to have high levels of debt. This was a result of women taking on most of

the burden for caring, and using credit to buy family necessities. Many of the women identified the experience of large debts as having a harmful impact on their health. Debt was described as:

"Depressing, devastating, a curse, demoralising, heartbreaking, can't sleep, housebound, living in denial"

Women's caring responsibilities made it hard for them to access paid work, and hence to build up financial assets.

"I am unable to work because I can't afford the childcare, the tax credits don't cover the cost of sending the kids to nursery even though my sister works there and gets a discount, it is expensive and there is a £40 gap I can't cover"

Human assets

The loss of human assets had a huge impact on people's ability to maintain or build other areas. For example when mental health was an area of concern, as it was for all but two of the women we interviewed, the ability to juggle both caring responsibilities and paid work was compromised.

"I used to work in a care home, but I became overworked. I worked 3 weeks of double shifts 7.45am - 9 pm. At the same time I was looking after my father who was ill receiving treatment in hospital. I had to take him to hospital on my lunchtime. In the end, one of the old ladies we were looking after found me crying and looked after me. After that I went on the sick with depression."

Health was a key issue for those in caring roles, with poor-health of dependents often being a key reason for not accessing employment.

"When my parents became ill, I looked after them for several years. As a result I was out of the job market for a very long time and found it difficult to get employed when I was ready to work again. It was the exhaustion of looking after my parents for 11 years which meant that when I lost them, and couldn't get back into the job market, my own health was at risk."

Overall, women tended to have fewer and lower post school qualifications, despite more of them leaving school with higher qualifications. Many went on to community level courses, but for most this did not translate into jobs.

Social assets

Having strong social assets, particularly moral and practical support from family and friends was very helpful, and had knock on benefits for other assets.

"I've got a lot of friends, and get fed three times a week, and they get to spend time with me"

Links with churches, community groups and projects provided a strong source of support as well as opportunities for volunteering and supporting others.

"I'm now back at work, though keeping up the house on my wage is still difficult. Nonetheless, I help out at the church now with fundraising and helping in study and youth groups. I also do a few hours at the charity shop. I feel that with people having given so much to me I can now help in giving something back".

Public assets

The quality of public service assets was important. For example few people engaged with public structures such as regeneration initiatives, but 60% of people cited using the library on a regular basis. Some told of far less positive experiences.

"Once my cooker broke, and I went to the job centre for a grant, they just asked 'can't you live on sandwiches? But my local MP, Dari Taylor, got involved and I got the loan"

How the assets relate to each other

Although each type of asset is important (financial, social etc), looking at how they interlink gives a more complete picture of how livelihoods are constructed. For example, when an external shock leads to the loss of one asset, this affects the individual's ability to grow assets in all areas, and can create a constant condition of insecurity, and fear of losing other assets. In our group of households a particularly common scenario for women was the breakdown of a relationship (social asset), leading to poor health (human asset), leading to decreased ability to earn and increased debt (financial assets), leading to poorer housing (physical assets) – sometimes compounded by ineffective or unhelpful responses from public services.

Our research indicates, however, that the reverse scenario can also occur. As one asset is increased, there is an improved ability to withstand shocks, and to develop other assets.

The livelihoods ladder

The amount of choice and flexibility that people have over livelihood strategies depends largely on what access they have to assets. Households may find themselves anywhere on the spectrum from no choice (survival), to a limited range of choice (coping) through to households with more choice (adapting) and finally those with a full range of choice (accumulating). An understanding of the strategies and outcomes at each level is a useful tool for identifying positive interventions to support the livelihoods of women and men in poverty.

In this study we identified the following characteristics within each of the above categories:

Surviving

- People feel that they are just surviving and life is a continual battle against things going wrong e.g. redundancy, illness of themselves or close relative, unwanted pregnancy, and are very vulnerable to external shocks
- Low self-esteem leads to a feeling that no-one is interested in them and that most support services are not for them
- Total reliance on benefits
- Arrears on rent or utility bills and high take up of doorstep/high interest credit
- Frequent use of strategies such as walking rather than paying for transport, borrowing from family and friends, living with in-laws or parents, not sending children on school trips, minimising food eaten, using candles for light, switching off heating, no treats

Coping

- People feel that that they are 'getting by' but there is not much prospect of them being any better off in the future. They can cope with minor external shocks, but are still vulnerable
- They may take advantage of support services but it usually does not help them enough to the next level, and they still feel alienated from power structures
- Unpaid and voluntary work and roles play an important part in women and men's lives
- Women still at risk from doorstep lending and high interest rates
- Total or partial reliance on benefits
- Low paid jobs often working at night for women or in dangerous/risky labouring and building jobs for men
- Engaging in the informal economy

Adapting

- People are actively working towards the future. They have a vision of what they want for the household, and what the opportunities are for achieving it.
- The strategies are robust enough to cope with many, but not all, external shocks.
- There is an interest in and engagement with community and public life
- At least one member of the household working in the formal economy
- Agreed balance of roles between male and female partners as to childcare and work
- Accessing mainstream credit

Accumulating

- People feel life is going well for them and it will continue to improve. They have a stock of assets which form a basis to build on in the future, and which they use to cope with external shocks
- Working in the formal economy
- Home ownership
- Gaining advanced qualifications
- Having access to mortgage and mainstream credit

Households placed themselves on the livelihoods ladder in the following way: 3 surviving; 14 coping; 6 adapting (researchers felt 2 of these would more accurately be described as coping) and one accumulating. Most households were either just surviving or coping, and were often reliant on support generously provided by family, friends and sometimes the wider community. These social assets were enabling them to cope. It appeared,

however, that the limited assets of a relatively poor community were being shared, which helped to prevent the most serious poverty, but did not allow people to accumulate stocks of assets and address their poverty in a long term sustainable way.

Conclusion

Using an asset-based livelihoods analysis has enabled us to uncover the reality of life for people experiencing poverty, the strategies they used to get by on a daily basis, and the opportunities they had to move towards a more sustainable future.

Based on our findings, we believe the 'Sustainable Livelihoods Approach' is a useful tool in ensuring that policy is based on an understanding of the strategies and choices that people have to make to survive. Moreover, the approach can enrich and broaden understanding of what is sometimes termed in the UK 'asset-based welfare'.

Our analysis also suggests that it would be worthwhile for policy makers and service providers to engage more directly with people experiencing poverty on a systematic and regular basis, ensuring that policy is sensitive to the survival choices people often have to make.

Having undertaken the analysis in Thornaby, we are working to develop concrete projects identified by local people to address two or three key issues highlighted by the research, and working with local decision makers to see how the learning from this work can illuminate and contribute to local and regional economic development.

For further information

The full report **When ends don't meet** is published by Church Action on Poverty (ISBN 1 874115 05 2 price: £5 plus £1 p&p). You can also download the summary and full report free from www.church-poverty.org.uk

Oxfam's UK Poverty Programme (UKPP) was established in 1996. Working to Oxfam's international aims, the UKPP works with partners to change how poverty is understood and challenged throughout the country. Oxfam UK Poverty Programme, Oxfam House, John Smith Dr, Oxford, OX4 2JY 01865 472415 www.oxfamgb.org/ukpp

Church Action on Poverty (CAP) works with church and community groups across the UK to enable people in poverty to speak for themselves and campaign and advocate for policies to eradicate poverty in the UK. Church Action on Poverty, Central Buildings, Oldham St Manchester M1 1JQ 0161 236 9321 www.church-poverty.org.uk

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