

Briefing Paper 26

Writing and talking about poverty

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What is this briefing paper about?

Briefing Papers aim to set out current thinking, discussion and debate around a specific topic or question. The views expressed in Briefing Papers are not necessarily shared by the Scottish Government.

This paper is about how community regeneration practitioners should describe poverty in their writing and presentations. John McKendrick of the Institute for Society and Social Justice Research (Glasgow Caledonian University) wrote this paper, drawing from his experience of writing and talking about poverty to the media and with policy-makers, practitioners, people experiencing poverty and those working in the anti-poverty sector. Based on an understanding that language is never neutral, this Paper encourages careful consideration to be given to how we describe poverty and argues that language is an important tool that should be mobilised in anti-poverty activity.

What are the main issues when talking and writing about poverty?

Language is never neutral

It is now well established that language can be sexist, ageist, racist or homophobic if not used appropriately. Some schools of thought would dismiss outright the idea that we should be restricted in how we describe the world in which we live. On one hand, those concerned to uphold freedom of speech or to curtail excessive 'political correctness' may argue as a point of principle against restrictions on what we say and how we say it. On the other hand, those who acknowledge that language can be harmful may also caution against restrictions, rationalising pragmatically that if inappropriate language is used, it exposes underlying problematic attitudes that otherwise may be disguised. However, the majority opinion is that our choice of language should be determined by the need not to offend or belittle (the 'value' of allowing inappropriate language is greatly outweighed by the problems this creates). There is now a range of guidance on how to write in a way that is not sexist, ageist, racist or homophobic.

Povertyism exists

Povertyism is the idea that people are discriminated against simply on the basis of living in poverty. Povertyism is driven by underlying attitudes that may be oblivious, unsympathetic or outwardly hostile toward people experiencing poverty. It is manifested in how people act toward them (behaviour) and how people speak of them (language). Povertyism has been described as an ugly word; perhaps this is befitting of the problem it describes.

Othering - Povertyism is similar to what Rush Lister has called the 'Othering' of 'the poor'. When 'Othered', the poor (them) are set apart from everyone else (people like us). Negativity is associated with 'the poor', i.e. most typically, the poor are presented either as an economic burden or as a morally bankrupt population. As with povertyism, 'Othering' is driven by underlying negative attitudes, and is conveyed through language and behaviour. Similarly, 'Othering' may have negative consequences when the intentions are well-meaning, for example when a writer attempts to convey indignation at the impoverishment of the living conditions of 'the poor', but only serves to widen the social distance between them ('the poor') and us.

Undeserving Poor - Povertyism and Othering are also similar to the way of thinking that identifies a deserving poor and an undeserving poor. Unlike 'Othering', where the dividing

line is drawn between 'the poor' and 'the non-poor', this way of understanding poverty subdivides the poor into a 'good' group and a 'bad' group. In recent times, the defining feature has often been the presence of (or inclination toward) paid work. The deserving poor being the low paid and the undeserving poor being the non-workers.

Clearly, there is overlap between povertyism, Othering and the deserving/undeserving poor dichotomy. Fundamentally, each preconceives strong social difference (either between the poor and the non-poor, or among the poor). Challenging the problems created by povertyism, Othering and identifying an undeserving poor must recognise that what we have in common is greater than that which sets us apart.

As a point of entry to encourage the writing and talking of poverty in a more measured way, community regeneration practitioners may find that challenging povertyism is the most productive approach.

- 'Othering' and writing within the deserving/undeserving dichotomy tends to reduce the issue to one side against another (undeserving, compared to deserving; the 'Othered' compared to those 'Othering'). Challenging povertyism has a broader reach. For example, its goal is not only to challenge the negative portrayal of the undeserving poor; it is equally concerned not to inadvertently reinforce stereotypes when seeking to portray what others may describe as the 'deserving poor'.
- Othering and writing about the undeserving poor is transparent. As the clear specification of a good side and a bad side is not an essential part of povertyism, it can therefore be more difficult to identify. Thus, as povertyism can be subtle and insidious, an explicit focus on challenging povertyism is more likely to target malpractice that is – but does not clearly and immediately appear to be – disrespectful toward people experiencing poverty.
- As it resonates with tackling sexism, ageism, racism and homophobia, challenging povertyism has a clearer sense of purpose in terms of promoting good practice and is more amenable to explicit articulation of policy objectives. Tackling discrimination is at the heart of challenging povertyism.

The idea of povertyism is gaining currency; in 2008, it was the focus of a TUC conference and it was used to underpin the argument of Damien Killeen in his Viewpoint for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation on poverty and human rights.

Like ageism, sexism, racism and homophobia, povertyism can be unintended and inadvertent, or it can result from the conscious choice to be anti-poor. Although the latter is the most distasteful, it is no longer acceptable in the 21st Century to forgive inappropriate behaviour or language on the grounds that we are unaware of the impact that this may have on others.

In the same way that we have guidance on how to use language in a way that is non-sexist, non-racist, non-ageist and non-homophobic, can we agree on ways of talking about poverty that are sensitive to avoiding povertyism? More than this, can community regeneration practitioners talk about poverty in a way that is not only sensitive, but is also effective and progressive?

How should we describe poverty?

The challenge is to recognise that language matters and to avoid the pitfalls of Othering, portraying an undeserving poor and povertyism. The goals for community regeneration practitioners are threefold:

- **Effective description.** This is the challenge of writing to deliver community regeneration outcomes, e.g. securing funds or support for anti-poverty interventions and, evaluating and describing the poverty-reducing impact of community regeneration activity.
- **Sensitive description.** This is the challenge of describing poverty in a way that is respectful toward people experiencing poverty and aware of how these descriptions might be received by them.
- **Progressive description.** This is the transformative challenge – using language to change the negative misperceptions that prevail.

The ultimate goal is to write in a manner that is at once effective *and* sensitive *and* progressive.

What is known about talking and writing about poverty already?

Community regeneration practitioners invariably become local poverty experts, gleaning knowledge and understanding of the key challenges and solutions required to tackle poverty in the communities within which they work. From this stock of practical knowledge on poverty, four issues should be acknowledged in preparation for writing and speaking of poverty effectively, sensitively and progressively.

Describing local poverty

The persistence of poverty in many neighbourhoods targeted for community regeneration can be disheartening. At worst, it may lead some to question whether tackling local poverty is worthwhile. In the context of this Paper, the persistence of area poverty presents a particular challenge in accurately describing the nature of this poverty. While poverty is persistent in place, it is not enduring for all households who experience it; only one in five endure persistent poverty, whereas more than two in five find that poverty is a transient experience, and almost one in five experience poverty recurrently. Thus, local anti-poverty work is reaching out to an ever-changing population. Describing poverty as persistent tends not to adequately describe how poverty is experienced in households.

Poverty thinking changes through time

The importance of poverty in public policy changes through time. Thus, the *rediscovery* of poverty in the UK in the 1960s lasted until the 1970s, when the idea of poverty was *rejected* by the UK Government (“there’s no such thing as society”), although still acknowledged by those in opposition. Poverty was *reconfigured* in the 1990s and was presented within a social justice framework as the political climate changed. Its importance established and Government targets set, poverty was somewhat *reduced* to a focus on income poverty for households with children. More recently – and particularly here in Scotland – the focus has shifted to the extent that tackling poverty has been *redeployed* as a means to tackle the underlying problem of income inequality. The shifting sands of how poverty is regarded in public policy must be appreciated if we are to understand lessons from earlier attempts to tackle local poverty.

The language of poverty changes through time

Related to this, is that the language of poverty changes too. Even here in Scotland, the language of *social justice* of the first Scottish Government (e.g. Social Justice Milestones),

was reoriented to focus more on *active intervention* in the second Scottish Government (e.g. the Closing the Opportunity Gap anti-poverty programme). As noted above, *inequality* has as prominent a focus as poverty in the current Scottish Government (e.g. the Solidarity Purpose Target).

Language as a tool

Poverty is political. This is inescapable and must be acknowledged if community regeneration practitioners are to operate beyond the narrow Party Political. This requires us to think through both what we say and how we say it. However, the importance of writing and talking poverty is not merely a political sensitivity. Our choice of language can also serve to reinforcing distance or to build bridges and alliances with people experiencing poverty. In summary, language is a tool that should be embraced and utilised carefully in attempts to tackle local poverty.

What can we add to our knowledge and understanding?

There are multiple audiences for community regeneration activity and the particular needs of these groups must be met.

Convincing the experts - using the correct description of the problem

Describing the nature of the problem accurately is important to the expert audience. While the wider public may be oblivious to, or less concerned with, the nuances between poverty, deprivation and income inequality, correctly describing the nature of the problem can assist in gaining the confidence of technical and expert audiences working in the field. Although ideas of poverty, inequality and deprivation are open to interpretation, there is some common agreement about what each means in Scotland. It is important that community regeneration practitioners communicate clearly what they mean using clearly defined terms and definitions.

The following definitions describe how experts tend to understand some of the key ideas:

- *Poverty* is not having enough income to buy, or to buy access to, what most people could be expected to have. It is measured for households. The most commonly used measure is when the total disposable income of everyone living in the households is less than 60% of what would be a typical disposable income for households of that size.
- *Income inequality* concerns how equally income is distributed across the population and is measured for whole societies (rather than households or small areas). The Scottish Government's Solidarity Purpose Target is an income inequality target which aims to increase overall income and the proportion of income earned by the three lowest income deciles as a group by 2017.
- *Multiple deprivation* is having too many of deprivations that undermine an adequate standard of living. In Scotland, this is measured for small areas; Multiply Deprived Areas are typically understood to be those which lie in the bottom 15%, when areas are ranked from 'have least' to 'have most'.

Convincing funders and the wider public – effective communication of the evidence

Powerful statistics and emotive personal stories of the everyday lives of people experiencing poverty can be effective tools in winning wider public support and securing highly-prized funds to tackle poverty in local areas. However, the ways in which this information is expressed can influence how it is perceived.

Community regeneration practitioners should acknowledge that their words can improve or exacerbate aspects of the poverty problem if not used with care. Bold statistics that convey that X% of people in neighbourhood Y are poor or that A% of adults in community B are without work can inadvertently reinforce negativity and may exacerbate the problems that the interventions seek to address, e.g. doing little to change the mindset of employers to convince them that people from community B are as employable as people from elsewhere.

Effective communication of evidence should not be defined merely in terms of that which was able to secure funds for an anti-poverty intervention. Effective communication also seeks to:

- **Challenge the widespread use of stereotype.** Here, the goal is to show how broad-brush portrayals that cast areas in a negative light inadequately reflect reality. In particular, there is a need to avoid over-generalising from individual cases, i.e. to avoid tarring the silent majority with the same brush as the prominent minority.
- **Reasoning out stereotypes.** Challenging stereotype to protect the majority could be achieved by focusing on the problems caused by particular sub groups and casting this smaller group as an 'undeserving and atypical poor'. However, and as Wynne-Jones has argued for the JRF, it is equally important to provide reasoned argument to explain the circumstances that have conspired to create and perpetuate these minority behaviours that are an affront to others.
- **Relate it to home.** Ultimately, the evidence practitioners communicate should demonstrate how people experiencing poverty are not a breed apart. They are also not merely 'people like us' (which, although well-meaning, tends to inflict a social distance). Rather, we are as one. Presenting the worries, aspirations and coping strategies of people experiencing poverty in terms to which we can relate is an effective means of garnering public support. The office worker's glass of wine to unwind at the end of a hard day's work has much in common with the cigarette that is puffed by the parent living in poverty to release the stresses of everyday life. Although both might be criticised on health grounds, there is more common ground than difference.

Communicating with people experiencing poverty

Communicating with people experiencing poverty is now widely acknowledged to be an integral part of effective anti-poverty interventions. Indeed, effective policy is often that in which users are not merely beneficiaries, but are also integrally involved in design, delivery and management. Effective communication involves both dissemination strategies and consideration of how information is expressed.

It must be acknowledged that the poverty community regeneration practitioners seek to address may not be acknowledged as explicitly by those they seek to assist. Although a minority may view their poverty as an affront that they both acknowledge and seek to contest, for the vast majority of people their poverty is not acknowledged, or at least is not recognised to the same degree. This is hardly surprising given the negative stereotypes and adverse public portrayal of poverty. For some, poverty is suggestive of personal failing. There may be a reluctance to be seen to ask for help.

This also presents challenges for the community regeneration practitioner. It may be helpful to follow the lead of researchers who have found that when directly engaging people experiencing poverty describing the focus of study as being on 'low income' rather than 'poverty' is more palatable.

The way ahead

We should all write and talk of poverty in a way that is both effective and respectful. Community regeneration practitioners should commit to follow and promote such an approach to describing poverty. The following principles and guidance on word choice may be a helpful starting point.

Adopting progressive principles for writing poverty

The following broad principles should be adhered to in writing and describing poverty.

- Avoid over-generalisation
- Avoid pejorative language that is disrespectful, even if this language has currency.
- View language as a tool in its own right for tackling the misperceptions surrounding poverty
- Seek to communicate in a manner that is at once effective, sensitive and progressive.

Don't use - Unacceptable everyday language

Some language is simply derogatory and should not be used. Words that should be avoided include:

- The poor / Undeserving poor / Deserving poor (as this implies an undeserving poor)
- Work-shy
- Underclass
- Welfare dependency / handouts / benefit culture / Languishing on benefit
- Sponger, scroungers
- Sink estates

Use cautiously - Problematic (but powerful) everyday language

Some language has the potential to make either a positive or a negative contribution to challenging poverty and must be used with care. Following the progressive principles outlined above may assist in avoiding inadvertent problems being created by using words such as:

- Poor people
- Impoverished
- Poverty-stricken
- Poor places / Deprived places
- Council housing estates / Peripheral housing estates / Estates
- Marginalised / Peripheral / Hidden
- The downtrodden
- Hard working families / hard working majority (as this implies that there are work-shy families)
- Benefit cheats

Use whenever possible – Respectful and progressive language

Some language emphasises that the problem is the condition of poverty (rather than the problem being the people who experience poverty). For example:

- People experiencing poverty
- Areas with deprivation / areas with poverty
- Low income living / living life on a low income

Resources

Reporting Poverty – an online resource for journalism tutors and students. Although not aimed at community regeneration practitioners, this website offers much sound advice and resources to assist in describing poverty fairly and authoritatively.

<http://www.jrf.org.uk/reporting-poverty>

Communicating Poverty Report. A 32 page report, published by the UK Coalition Against Poverty in 2008 which argues the case for “more effective communications to build greater public support for efforts to reduce poverty and inequality”.

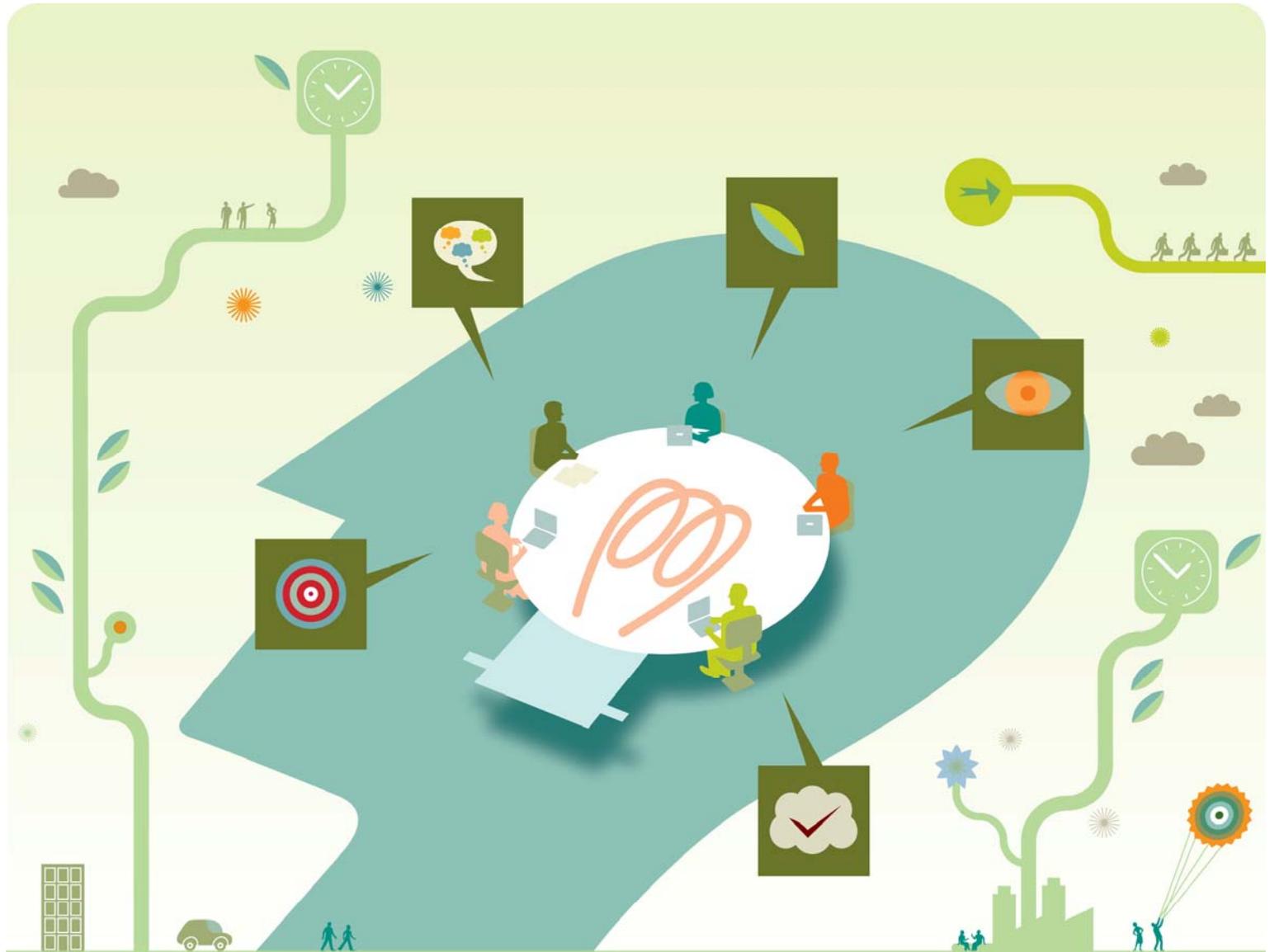
http://ukcap.org/Communicating_Poverty%5B1%5D.pdf

Media, Poverty and Public Opinion in the UK. Research report, published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation in 2008, which analyses how the media report poverty in the UK and how this is received by the wider public.

<http://www.jrf.org.uk/publications/media-poverty-and-public-opinion-uk>

Poverty in Scotland 2011. Published by the Child Poverty Action Group, this is a comprehensive review of poverty in contemporary Scotland comprising evidence and expert commentary. Contains an introductory chapter that explains how poverty and related ideas are used in Scotland. For more information, contact:

<http://www.cpag.org.uk/scotland/>.



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