

The Equalities Review: Interim Report for Consultation A Response from Oxfam’s UK Poverty Programme

Equalities and poverty: the work of Oxfam’s UK Poverty Programme

Oxfam GB established a UK Poverty Programme (UKPP) in the mid 1990s in response to a concern that it should begin to address poverty ‘at home’ in a more systematic way. Our vision is that diverse communities of women and men living in poverty will exercise their rights to a decent and secure standard of living in the UK.

Oxfam believes that poverty, social exclusion and discrimination represent a denial of human rights, preventing people from exercising their full rights (e.g. to housing, adequate health care, education, to an adequate standard of living). In our view, rights-based approaches are essential in tackling poverty, social exclusion and discrimination.

The UKPP’s work is organised around the key programme themes of sustainable livelihoods, humanitarian protection, and equalities. We have piloted gender analysis within services as a means of highlighting gender assumptions, identifying inequalities, and developing action in response. We are also developing a race equality programme to tackle the causes of poverty, and supporting black and minority ethnic communities in seeking solutions. For further information about the UKPP’s work, see www.oxfamgb.org/ukpp/

Introduction to Oxfam’s response

Oxfam welcomes the Equalities Review as a broad-ranging contribution to furthering public debate and action on inequality and discrimination. Based on our experience, this response emphasises the importance of data collection in achieving a good picture of inequality. The submission comments on the framework presented in the Review, and its transferability to the UK. It then emphasises the importance of participation by people experiencing poverty and discrimination in finding solutions to issues of inequality. It highlights the importance of legislation in bringing about long-term change, and the effectiveness of campaigning groups, alongside decision-makers, in promoting such change. It goes on to underline the need for a stronger analysis of structural and institutional causes of inequality. It concludes by outlining recommendations for the final stage of the Review.

The importance of disaggregated data

Annex 2 of the Review acknowledges that it is difficult to compile a complete picture of inequality across the country because data collected is fragmented. Oxfam’s programme experience is that official data collection by gender is patchy, and by

gender and race together is unusual. For us, evidencing the gender and race dimensions of poverty has been hampered by this lack of systematic data¹. In order to demonstrate the nature of multiple inequalities, this data is essential. Public bodies need that information in order to remove discrimination, set and tackle equality goals, and decide where to conduct gender impact assessments. For example, Oxfam has worked with Redcar and Cleveland Borough Council to monitor the take up of their Job Connect service by gender, something that is not required by central government. The Borough established that only 25% of users of the service were female, and put in place an outreach scheme to find and support them. While new models to measure indicators as proposed in the Review are valuable, there is no substitute for formal requirement of disaggregated data when tackling deep-seated inequalities.

Linking equalities and poverty

Oxfam believes that inequality and poverty are inextricably linked, and that in order to eradicate poverty in the long term, the structural causes need to be addressed. For example, women are in the majority in the poorest groups in the UK, and solutions to poverty will not be effective unless they address power relations and resource imbalances between women and men.

There are also important connections between inequality based on income and wealth, and inequality based on social divisions such as age, disability, race, gender, sexual orientation, and religious affiliation. We would therefore like to see the Review make specific reference to poverty, and highlight the connections between poverty and many forms of inequality such as race and gender.

The ‘capabilities’ framework

The Review introduces the ‘capabilities’ framework as a new approach to measuring and defining inequalities, and the concepts of ‘vulnerabilities’ and ‘trigger episodes’ as a way to track disadvantage across lifetimes and generations.

In relation to poverty, a focus on ‘capabilities’ has some advantages. It emphasises a broad notion of poverty including human agency and the importance of individual freedom to make choices. However there is a risk that highlighting ‘capabilities’ can downplay the central importance of increased income in poverty reduction. It can be used to justify a policy stance opposed to raising the incomes of those in poverty, when in reality inequality will be best tackled by a focus on both adequate income, and potential ‘capabilities’.

In a UK context, the capabilities discourse of individual empowerment also runs the risk of shifting emphasis away from anti-discrimination measures, and placing too much responsibility on individuals for solving their own problems. It potentially devalues the genuine difficulties and structural barriers experienced by people in poverty and could reinforce the culture of blame that perceives them as ‘workshy’ and ‘feckless’.

Oxfam has used the “capacities and vulnerabilities” framework in its international humanitarian work. The approach has been helpful in assessing what refugees and

internally displaced people have the capacity to do in situations where they are left with few possessions and support. Oxfam has also promoted women's empowerment in developing countries, based on women's agency and capabilities in situations where they have few assets and no significant support from welfare systems.

In the UK, we have used an assets-based approach to understand how 'triggers' such as post-natal depression and childcare responsibilities can plunge women into a cycle of poor health and an inability to seek or keep paid work. We have also observed that when the trigger of redundancy hits, men's image of themselves and what are appropriate 'male' activities for them, can limit their ability to be flexible in finding solutions.

Whilst we have therefore found concepts such as these helpful in certain circumstances, we sound a note of caution. The capacities and vulnerabilities model is useful in mapping complex situations, can be used at different stages (eg. before, during and after a disaster, major change, or intervention), and encourages a long-term perspective. However the framework remains primarily a tool for planning responses in disaster relief and development work. It also has limitations. For example, it is very easy to use the framework and exclude gender issues, and practitioners report that it does not lend itself to participatory uses².

Lack of participation

The Review has been built on consultation with, and submissions from, a range of organizations during 2005. However, Oxfam is concerned that there appears to have been little consultation during the period with people at grassroots level experiencing discrimination and inequality themselves. Prejudice and lack of respect for women and men in poverty are significant barriers to their participation at all levels, and to the development of public support and political will to tackle poverty and inequality effectively.

The UKPP's understanding draws on the views of people in poverty themselves as expressed through projects such as the 'Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power'³, and 'Get Heard'⁴. We believe that men and women experiencing poverty can not only provide extremely useful insights into the difficulties they face, but also are uniquely placed to advise on effective solutions. They can identify the nature of the barriers they face, and contribute to the development of policies to address them. If the Review aims to be effective in tackling the core power issues at the heart of inequality, then the involvement of excluded and marginalized women and men is essential in defining the nature of the problem, and designing appropriate responses.

Celebrating achievements in the field of equalities

During the Review consultation period many organisations have made it clear that campaigning is essential in bringing about lasting change and eradicating discrimination. Without campaigning, key discrimination issues would never become part of the public agenda at all. For example, in relation to ending violence against women - a key source of discrimination – public policy has moved from a position where it was not regarded as an area of legitimate public debate and discussion, to

one where legislation is now in place; this was brought about in major part by pressure from women's groups for action.

Oxfam is concerned that the Review runs the risk of under-estimating the way in which pressure for new, and implementation of existing, legislation has made solid and significant progress. Such pressure has brought about real practical change, and also shifted attitudes and beliefs, in relation to inequality over the decades. Our experience of working in the UK and internationally, with women's groups, campaigning for legislation on key strategic issues for women, supported by the championship of like-minded decision makers, demonstrates how important such work has been in achieving greater gender equality.

Improving life chances

The Review's focus on improving life chances through education and employment as key to future action on inequality is a pragmatic one, given the Government's priorities. However, Oxfam would like to see greater recognition of how institutional structures and power relations create discrimination – and racism in particular, which the Review barely mentions.

Structural causes of inequality and poverty require stronger action. For example, the ways the pensions system and the labour market are structured continue to prevent effective action to tackle the long-term barriers faced by women experiencing poverty and ethnic minority groups. The Commission on Women and Work has identified the structural causes of the gender pay gap as a key area of discrimination for women, and the Review's suggestions here need strengthening.

More robust analysis in relation to race equality is also needed. For example, Oxfam's experience with Asian women home workers demonstrates the need for stronger measures to overcome inequality exacerbated by lack of choice, prejudice and stereotyping.

Recommendations

We would welcome further analysis in order to promote united and effective action to tackle the structures of inequality and disadvantage over the next decades. Oxfam makes the following recommendations to strengthen the final Review.

1. *Promotion of the systematic availability of good quality data on inequality, linked to data about poverty.* The Equalities Review highlights lack of data across all the equalities strands. Government should require the disaggregation of such data in the operation and reporting of its mainstream agencies, and resource such data collection appropriately. We also recommend the use of gender impact assessments as method of gathering this data.
2. *New conceptual frameworks such as 'capabilities' can be useful alongside acknowledgement of other factors in tackling inequality.* These include the importance of increased income for those in poverty alongside the importance

of individual agency in bringing about change, and the need to tackle structural inequalities in society in order to narrow inequality gaps.

3. *People experiencing poverty and inequality should be fully involved in identifying the barriers that affect them, and in finding solutions.* Tackling inequality effectively means investing in building the capacity of marginalized men and women to talk about their experience, creating fora where they are in control of the agenda, and developing a combination of ‘sticks’ and ‘carrots’ to encourage service deliverers to work towards real empowerment of marginalized groups.⁵
4. *Stronger and more vocal championship of equality successes in tackling the long term and structural nature of poverty and disadvantage across the UK:* Legislation has played a key part in ensuring solid and significant progress in tackling inequality over the decades. Progress since 1997 in tackling gender inequality has been hampered by lack of leadership in promoting the importance of these achievements. Our own experience demonstrates the key importance of leadership in bringing about positive results in tackling inequality.
5. *Acknowledgement and promotion of the value of positive action in combating discrimination and supporting equality measures:* Oxfam has supported positive action to ensure a stronger voice for women through training women for leadership, and emphasizes the value of women-only groups in building women’s confidence to tackle structural discrimination (eg. in the provision of public transport⁶). We have no doubt that such action has great value in helping women to understand the gender-specific discrimination they face, and to gain the confidence to tackle it.

¹ The Oxfam ReGender Project, and Engendering Policy Project, South Lanarkshire

² March C., Smyth I., Mukhopadhyay M. (1999) A Guide to Gender Analysis Frameworks, Oxfam

³ Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power (2000) Listen hear: The right to be heard, Policy Press and UK Coalition against Poverty

⁴ ‘Get Heard’ has been running workshops with people in poverty in order to feed their views into the next UK National Action Plan for Social Inclusion. The project has been jointly funded by the UKPP, with the UK Department for Work and Pensions and the European Commission.

⁵ Oxfam UK Poverty Programme response to “Empowerment and the Deal for Devolution” speech by David Miliband, February 2005

⁶ Oxfam Social Inclusion Project; piloting Engendering Change training in North East England and Wales