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## Finding a voice through analysis of the everyday experience of poverty

**Maria Chase, Joan Price and Sam Swaby, with Su Braden**

### • Introduction

In 1998 Oxfam UKI<sup>1</sup> undertook a strategic review of their work in 15 countries, consulting partners, supporters, their own staff and the poor themselves. The questions being asked were:

- How is poverty changing?
- What is your perception of what Oxfam is doing about poverty?
- What should Oxfam be doing in the future?

Various methods were used: stakeholder survey in 15 countries, peer review and supporter surveys. This article discusses a method known as 'Global Voices', which aimed to bring the voices of the real experts on poverty – the poor themselves – to the strategic review. The process involved training Oxfam's local partners in the uses and processes of participatory video. The partners kept the video equipment, which they continue to use.

Each group was trained by students and staff of the University of Reading's Master's course 'Television and Video for Development' who accompanied the partners to the field and supported them during their first participatory video work with local people, including:

- street children and youths in Nairobi, Kenya;
- Maasai pastoralists and youth employment co-operatives in Tanzania;

<sup>1</sup> Oxfam UKI (United Kingdom and Ireland) is one of the largest non-governmental development organisations.

- the inhabitants of Devonport, Plymouth in the UK.

The findings of the Global Voices contributions from all three countries revealed some surprising similarities in their considerations of Oxfam's three questions. For example, in each group the question of land and their sense of identity in relation to 'their patch' was analysed, but in each case a sense of growing insecurity about their right of access to 'their patch' was expressed. Each group also spoke of a strong desire to do things for themselves, despite facing increasing constraints; and all the groups expressed a sense of 'poverty of voice', a frustration at not being heard. Nowhere was this frustration expressed more strongly than by the Devonport group.

The account given here examines the Devonport experience, the training processes, the ways in which they were used by the local partners in Devonport, and the analysis that resulted. It is written through the voices of three team members.

### • Oxfam's partners in Devonport

Devonport is amongst the poorest regions in Britain which were granted money under the Single Regeneration Budget (SRB). This fund aims to rebuild such areas, not only in terms of physical infrastructure, but also access to education, health and jobs. Oxfam's partner in Devonport is Devonport Action Against Poverty (DAPS) which works in several of the SRB areas of the borough. The SRB funding represents the largest input of money to the area since the end of its days as a busy trading sea port and naval dockyard in the 1980s.

DAPS is housed in a flat of a grey apartment block. The offices are occupied in the day time by staff and volunteers. In the evenings they are used by local residents. Residents also have the keys and at night busy parents can take it in turns to work in peace with access to telephones and computers for their community activities, such as organising local junior league football and the Credit Union. DAPS also share their office space and some of their aims and objectives with the Citizen's Advice Bureau (see Box 1).

#### BOX 1

The twin aims of the **Citizen's Advice Bureau** are:

to ensure that individuals do not suffer through lack of knowledge of their rights and responsibilities, or of the services available to them, or through an inability to express their needs effectively;

to exercise a responsible influence on the development of social policies and services, both locally and nationally.

**Devonport Action Against Poverty** has the additional following aim:

to alleviate and combat poverty in Devonport with the principle objectives of:  
empowering people in Devonport to combat poverty on their own behalf  
challenging policies and practices which keep people in poverty.

### Training in participatory video

The participatory video team from DAPS was formed for the 'Global Voices' project from volunteers, workers and local residents. The original DAPS Video team<sup>2</sup> included:

- Joan Price: a Citizens Advice Bureau worker based at DAPS;
- Sam Swaby: a local resident and volunteer;
- Liz Brown: a part-time worker involved with youth and music projects
- Maria Chase: a local resident and single parent, volunteer at DAPS

<sup>2</sup> Clare O'Farrell helped as post-graduate student from the MA Television and Video for Development at Reading University. Additional training was offered by staff from the course.

- Maria Coles: a local resident and volunteer at DAPS.

Three of the original DAPS video team, Sam Swaby, Joan Price and Maria Chase, have written about their own learning around the analysis of poverty that arose from the initiative.

**Sam Swaby**, a father of teenage children, was perhaps the most sceptical member of the group who gathered for the initial participatory video training. He offers a frank account of his thoughts over the first three weeks:

"A group of individuals, all with their own reasons for taking part and from different backgrounds, working together for the first time with one link, DAPS. (My thoughts: *Chances of learning anything useful - nil, but we get to keep the equipment so who cares?*)"

Then the pressure started. There were lots of other things I should have been doing. But we had a tight timetable to produce a film and someone was telling me how to use a video camera - when I'd had one for years. (My thoughts: *Chances of learning anything useful - nil, but we get to keep the equipment so who cares?*)

Then the process started, still under pressure, added to the inner pressure of trying to cope with working with each other, which was not easy. Trying to stay in control of myself, not to say something that would upset others, but seeing how effective this process was at making people contribute in different ways, using different skills, but all having to contribute. (My thoughts still: *Chances of learning anything useful - not high, but we get to keep the equipment so who cares?*)"

By now the training has graduated into field work practice and the team is passing their skills on to others. Sam's personal account continues:

"Out in the wide world of Devonport, the houses and the streets, using participation with people who are not part of our video group. We are ensuring that they have their say. We take pleasure in watching what we've taped and picking a jewel from miles of tape. We are realising the power not only of the video, but

more importantly of the process. We are observing as tongue-tied 'nothing worth saying', 'what do I know' people, flower and express their emotions, their desires, their fears. It's hard to believe what's going on, but we can watch it over and over again on the tape. So it is happening.

In one area of Devonport, Pottery Quay, down by the dockyard, we have to do something more to take the process forward. Can we use their video to encourage them to challenge what's happening them? They are an isolated group of local residents who feel 'no one listens' - but they have found a voice. The video was the key, but the process we learned has been the passport, enabling, empowering whatever the 'buzz' word is. It's working. (My thoughts again: *Chances of learning anything useful - in fifty plus years of living, this is probably the most important thing I have ever learned.*)"

**Joan Price** has lived in Devonport for most of her married life. She, too, became a founding member of DAPS video team. Joan looks back at the process known as 'Rivers of Life' which was used with the DAPS group in the initial training to open up discussions about broad issues, to get the group to know and to listen to each other, and to discuss issues around authorship.

The group worked in pairs, one facilitating the other to record their lives as a drawing of a river from its source to the sea. The source was seen as birth, the sea was where the person drawing saw their life at that moment, or where they hoped it might lead. The lives were then recounted on camera either by the person or the facilitator. In feedback after seeing the video recordings of these narratives, the group discussed what they felt about authorship, what they felt when someone else told their story, and about the content.

**Joan** writes: "I came to the Global Voices video project with a good insight of the problems that poverty causes. I felt I was aware of the main concerns of people who lived in Devonport. However, as part of our training we used some PRA techniques including 'Rivers of Life' and mapping. I have been a CAB [Citizens Advice Bureau] worker

for several years and I am used to listening to the most intimate and private details of peoples lives. These PRA tools such as the 'Rivers of Life', in which the image of a river from its source to the sea is used as a metaphor for the story of someone's complete life-story, with all its twists and turns, sluggish moments and rapids, gave me new insights. It made me realise how people go in and out of poverty over their lifetime and also re-emphasised how decisions at a crucial moment in time effect ... the rest of a person's life."

### • **Setting the boundary**

**Sam** comments on the mapping process: "In this process we were asked to indicate resources within the area we thought of as Devonport and that we would describe as 'local', and then to list those resources for which we would have to leave the area. But just to identify an area which we could all agree as 'ours' was difficult and raised issues which led to good participation.

In the end, the mapping led us to identify which resources such as shops, doctors, or leisure facilities are present in the area we had finally defined as 'ours', and which were missing in the local community. From this we were able to identify gaps in provision and we went on to look at what was causing this lack of resources, or who might be able to influence the provision of these resources. When we later used this exercise in various parts of our community, working with a variety of local groups, it was interesting to see the common issues that were raised from the different areas.

We were now able to understand that our community in what we had defined as "our area" is loosely divided into three separately identifiable areas, each with a different relationship to funding [see Table 1].

It was interesting, nevertheless, to see common issues raised by local groups from the different areas, despite the very different amounts of money spent in the specific locations. Differences lay in the perceptions of causes and solutions."

**Joan Price** explains how she analysed her own learning during the process of using participatory video with other residents in the

community. "Our present government says they want continual engagement with the people over the consequences of their laws and policies. If this is true, I believe that Participatory Video and the use of other participatory learning and action techniques could be a key to enabling local people to analyse and represent their experiences.

Until now we have been governed from above and the Government only engages with the people at the time of a general election. Local government at parish or ward, district and county council levels are mainly controlled by the imposition of the party 'whip'<sup>3</sup> or by individual concerns - councillors don't even seem to do any research on matters of public concern. There is much talk at the level of local government officers of consultation, but too often the right questions aren't asked, decisions are made elsewhere or the 'contract culture'<sup>4</sup> intervenes. Nowhere is this more true than in areas with a high level of deprivation and poverty and yet so many of the Government's policies are targeted on reducing inequality.

The mapping emphasised that what I had always considered to be the historical boundaries of Devonport were fundamentally still as real to the people living here, despite the changes that had been imposed and the limitations of access that now existed, and despite, importantly, the new boundaries that had been defined as the areas for the Single Regeneration Budget plans and programmes. This analysis shaped our Global Voices project and it was the old historically-defined Devonport that we looked at throughout the process. As a result, we realised that divisions and resentments were being created by the imposition of new boundaries which were defining the areas being targeted for Single Regeneration Budget funding, while other neighbouring areas were being left out. The most important of the newly imposed boundaries - the wall of the dockyard was seen by all the participants in the mapping as a

symbol of the land that had been lost to 'their patch'. It became a theme for the final video.

I had read about the current methods of funding but my problem was to understand how the system worked. I was unaware of these new arguments put forward by the people who were intended to be the beneficiaries.

As our work progressed and we began to use the methods that we had learnt in our own training with other groups around the borough. I found that the research we did gave a name - 'structural adjustment' - to what I had seen as the exploitation of British people by the finance houses and financial institutions and put it in a global context.

Before taking part in the processes we learnt, using PLA methods to research and analysis with local people, and video to review with them, and to represent their findings, I hadn't been aware of their fears and I had rarely seen people in their home environment. Making the video gave me an insight into this and much else besides.

We developed our analysis outwards from the Rivers of Life and the maps, to filming with people from local groups throughout the Borough. I saw the problems of pollution and poor living conditions at first hand. I saw it at night and early in the morning. For the external sequences we trudged the streets and filmed to set the scene. Fortunately for us the weather was good but our audiences did not get the feeling of eternal greyness that can overwhelm the place for much of the year."

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<sup>3</sup> Person who belongs to a political party and tries to get all party members voting the same way on an issue.

<sup>4</sup> The contract culture arises because no jobs are given for longer than a two year contract, even those created under in the community under the SRB.

**Table 1. Three areas of Davenport and the impacts of SRB funding**

	<b>Area 1</b>	<b>Area 2</b>	<b>Area 3</b>
<b>Methods of funding</b>	where large amounts of money have been made available through SRB funding	where no money has been made available apart from normal local government funding	where small amounts of money, placed almost directly into the hands of the local community, have been available
<b>Effects of funding</b>	Many local people stated that the process had empowered specific groups of residents but had left the vast majority with even less power, as the more powerful groups had become the power brokers for the entire area.	Amongst groups in this area, Pottery Quay, the local government was often identified as the Area Housing Office, which was seen as a major block on any progress towards better conditions. 'They don't care about us. They have the money but they don't want to give it to us because of where we live'. This was an often repeated theme.	More local people appeared to take a wider perspective on the causes and solutions to problems of funding. More people in this area attended meetings both in and beyond Devonport, and are often funded to do so by local community organisations. As a result they often stated that redress lay beyond local or even sometimes national authorities.

• **Outcomes of the process - how did new analysis produce change?**

**Maria Chase**, a single parent and volunteer at DAPS, writes about some of the outcomes of the Global Voices participatory video project from her point of view:

"The object of the video process was to give people living in poverty in Devonport a voice and forum to raise their issues, but also, and perhaps more importantly, to say what they thought would raise their quality of life, and therefore enter into the anti-poverty debate.

It was quickly evident that the community members had a far more astute knowledge of where money could be spent to improve their quality of life. Tragically, although a great deal of money has been sunk into the area, partly, perhaps, because for a time it was categorised as the 'most deprived Ward in England', these huge sums have had little positive impact on the community as a whole, especially on its most vulnerable members. The film that was finally made illustrated this point starkly, as well as raising a whole range of other issues." (see Box 2)

The processes motivated participants not only to explore issues but to work out strategies

which can change their situation and take them forward. For example, the play back of the completed video to Pottery Quay residents, who had been involved in its making, motivated them to start a Tenants' Group. They had seen that they needed to build on the collective activity of the Global Voices project and try to address problems they had analysed around pollution from the nuclear submarine base, lack of safe play space for smaller children, and a club for the older ones. They decided to act, as well, to challenge the practices which adversely affect their community, such as their relationships with the housing office over repairs to their flats and houses.

The most empowering aspect of the process was the local ownership of material produced during the research, filming and the making of the final tape. This was reflected in the uses both DAPS and other participants made of the tapes.

The impact of the video and its introduction by one of the community members, at the Oxfam Assembly, showed how powerful and humbling the voice of real people living in poverty can be. It demonstrated the value and importance of their input into the anti-poverty debate.

Each time the film has been shown it has had much the same effect. It generated a high level

of debate at the People's Summit, in Birmingham, during the European Anti-poverty Network's seminar. The DAPS video team also showed the tape at the Plymouth Community Health Council and raised debates around health issues and links with poverty. As a result, the Council have asked to learn to use PLA with video themselves in order to set up a dialogue with local residents around health issues.

**BOX 2**  
**LISTENING FOR A CHANGE**

"...It is actually the land. This is the heart of Devonport and we are being denied that heart." (a resident speaking about the Ministry of Defence occupation of land for the naval dockyard and stores).

"It used to be a thriving community before the bloody dockyard wall got built and sort of divided the people."

"The wall stretches for three or four miles right to Pottery Quay and it's a bit like the Berlin Wall because it keeps the dockyard in and the people out."

"I'm sick, fed up of seeing hypodermic needles lying everywhere and my children actually picking them up."

"We elect our governments but it seems whoever gets in, they conveniently forget about the people who voted for them, unless you've got the money and can do something for them. Well, we did do something for them - we got them in in the first place."

**Joan Price** adds her thoughts on the outcomes of the project: "Later last summer we showed the video at the Oxfam International Assembly. It had a massive impact because it brought home to the audience the universality of the problems of all people who live in poverty. The problems of land, debt and ill thought-out public policies were shared with those in the third world. Our video was instrumental in changing the policy of Oxfam regarding their major concerns as being overseas. Their representatives from the third world welcomed this change and ending of the feeling of colonialism.

Now we have been asked to take part in an Interactive Exhibition on Health Action Zones and Local Involvement.<sup>5</sup> Both Health Action

Zones and Our Healthier Nation have as their targets the reduction of health inequalities, particularly those related to poverty. Yet when I look at the list of those invited to attend I can see very few representatives of people living in poverty. Our video is the one way they can attend and have their views listened to. They have a captive audience and although the video may only give 30 people's views but it also shows the background of their living and their analysis of the problems and possible solutions".

Finally, **Sam Swaby**: "The people of Pottery Quay now operate without our support. Their group is struggling to retain a wide membership, but so is every other residents group in the area I guess.

I have become involved in a 'training project' funded by Social Services, ...working with other agencies to provide a training that local people could enjoy and want to take part in. It is based almost entirely on the participatory techniques of the Global Voices training. And our style is based on the principles: there are no experts, nobody has all the answers, and between us all we can make some good guesses at them.

We use open questions, all those 'Ws'<sup>6</sup>. We are planning our third session as I write. As none of the facilitators had 'teaching' experience, we worked out what felt good to us, around the participatory format, and there you go!

Looking back on our shared experience, I still haven't done any of the editing, in fact I've done very little actual video operating, but what a life changing event the 'video project' was. I wouldn't have missed it for the world."

• **Joan Price, Maria Chase and Sam Swaby**, DAPS, 69 Granby Street, Devonport, Plymouth, UK with **Su Braden**, who compiled this article.

<sup>5</sup> New government initiatives.

<sup>6</sup> What, where, when, why, who, how?