**Manuscript version: Author's Accepted Manuscript**
The version presented in WRAP is the author's accepted manuscript and may differ from the published version or Version of Record.

**Persistent WRAP URL:**
http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/110546

**How to cite:**
Please refer to published version for the most recent bibliographic citation information.
If a published version is known of, the repository item page linked to above, will contain details on accessing it.

**Copyright and reuse:**
The Warwick Research Archive Portal (WRAP) makes this work by researchers of the University of Warwick available open access under the following conditions.

Copyright © and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable the material made available in WRAP has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge. Provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

**Publisher's statement:**
Please refer to the repository item page, publisher's statement section, for further information.

For more information, please contact the WRAP Team at: wrap@warwick.ac.uk.

**warwick.ac.uk/lib-publications**

**Challenges for anti-poverty action: developing approaches that are solutions focused, participative and collaborative**

Michael Orton

**Introduction**

Readers of this journal will be all too familiar with information and statistics about the extent of poverty. For example, 14 million people in the UK (out of a total population of 66.5 million) live in poverty; it is forecast that 5.2 million children will be living in poverty by 2022; it is over 30 years since the UK had a poverty rate under 20 per cent; and in 21st century Britain poverty has always been higher than it was in the 1960s and 70s.[1]

Within the context of poverty as widespread, deep and embedded, this article contributes to growing debate about challenges for anti-poverty action and development of what are described as solutions focused, participative and collaborative approaches. The article does so by reflecting on a civil society initiative which involved a dozen or so organisations making three shared recommendations for the November 2017 Budget. The article is in three parts. First, consideration is given to arguments that new approaches to anti-poverty work are needed. Second, the civil society Budget initiative is discussed. Third, key points to inform future work are highlighted. The conclusion reflects on possible challenges for those concerned with poverty reduction.

**The need for new approaches**

There are growing calls for new approaches to tackling poverty. For example, Beresford (2017) argues there is currently a "well-rehearsed conversation" in which:

> *Researchers who produce ever more evidence about problems that are only too well known seem to think that by telling the government how much damage its policies are doing, it will magically stop imposing them. Or that if they show "the public" how bad things are, then "something will have to change".*

Knight (2013) makes a similar point, arguing that in relation to poverty:

> *Nearly every week a new report appears, setting out some aspect of the problem and how it is getting worse. Reports describe rising debt, reduced benefits…the growing use of foodbanks, but despite this constant stream of commentary, little appears to change as a result.*

Indeed, Beresford (2017) cites David Donnison as long ago as 1971 saying in relation to a publication about the state of UK housing and homelessness, that "no more reports" should be commissioned until something was done with the evidence that was already there. Donnison's point was the problem was not a lack of evidence, but that

little or nothing was being done about it. With regard to contemporary reports on poverty Beresford (Ibid.) contends that:

> there is only one thing to say with any confidence…they are very unlikely to bring about any significant change in the government's policy.

Another contribution to debate is made by Watson (2016). He poses the provocative question: "Is the third sector failing?" and argues that:

> The third sector – charities, voluntary and community groups – makes a difference to millions of lives in the UK and around the world every day [but there is a need for] a long overdue conversation within the sector about where we are and aren't getting it right.

Beresford, Knight and Watson do not just note problems, but also suggest ways forward and which can be seen as indicating three themes: a solutions focus; user-led/participative approaches; and collaborative working. To take the first of these three themes (a solutions focus) the point is made explicitly by Knight. Having criticised 'the constant stream of commentary from which little appears to change' Knight's conclusion is that a focus on solutions is required. As he puts it:

> The current social science literature is almost wholly descriptive and analytical about social problems, rather than practical and inspiring about their solutions…[what is needed is]…a solution focused literature.

Beresford's similar contention is that:

> merely focusing on the system's failings [is] a very limited approach to achieving change.

This is not to advocate an either/or between the identification of problems and solutions: both are needed. The point being made is that the latter is currently neglected compared with the former.

Regarding user-led/participative approaches, Beresford argues specifically that what is needed to tackle poverty is to:

> support people in poverty to develop their own ideas and solutions for change instead of asking them how awful things are.

What this means, suggests Beresford, is providing support for user-led organisations that can speak for people in poverty themselves, with such groups having shown their ability to achieve change with thought-through strategies, including parliamentary, campaigning, virtual and direct action. They also provide legitimate ways of drawing on and making public their personal difficulties and hardship, without reducing it to the level of "sad stories" and statistics. Beresford's conclusion is that:

> user-led organisations point the way to real alternatives to welfare reform…This is more proactive than merely focusing on the system's failings.

Knight takes a similar view and sees the Living Wage campaign[2] as an example of people being involved:

> through commitment to ideas that bring positive changes in their communities. Rather than being victims of change, such an approach puts people on the front foot, helping to create the changes they want to see.

This could be constructed as an either/or between user-led groups and professionals but another approach is to see people with lived experience and people with learned experience (or expertise by experience and professional expertise) working together to achieve change. This leads into the next point which is about collaborative working.

In considering ways forward, Watson (2016) argues that:

> The answer has to be collaboration. We need to work together, pool our resources and share learning, ideas, skills, expertise and funding…Real change will only come when collective impact is embraced – through our shared voice and actions.

This raises a general question as to how to encourage working together, but a key starting point is that joint working needs to be shown as having value. This ties to new thinking in the US around what is referred to as 'systems entrepreneurship' (Vexler, 2017). The systems entrepreneurship approach argues that it is time to focus on solving problems through creative collaboration and networks, rather than creating new institutions or undertaking habitual one-off projects. A further link can be made with theories of change (something which is often not discussed in relation to anti-poverty work). Many theories of change exist, but one potentially successful approach to achieving change can be expressed in simple terms as being when lots of different organisations and individuals all start saying the same thing (for a helpful account of how change happens from a practical rather than theoretical perspective see Williams, 2015). The Living Wage campaign, mentioned above, can be cited as an example because while many factors contributed to its success, uniting people around a simple, transparent, clear ask was one of them. The argument is that when it comes to influencing, multiple voices and organisational efforts all pushing in the same direction provides a far greater likelihood of success than situations where efforts are silo'd and disparate.

A final point to make is about understandings of policy development. As referred to above, anti-poverty funding tends to be for individual organisations to deliver specific interventions with discrete impact. But real world policy development is invariably found to be "complex and messy" (Institute for Government, 2011) rather than - certainly at the level of national government - a linear, one-dimensional process in which a single action leads to a specified change. The idea that (one way) change happens is when lots of different people start saying the same thing appears better to reflect the complex and messy reality of policy development.

The above has highlighted arguments for new approaches to anti-poverty action based on solutions focused, participatory and collaborative methods. Consideration will now be given to an initiative that reflected these themes.

**The civil society 2017 Budget initiative**

The Budget initiative developed organically, out of informal conversations in summer 2017 about the potential for shared civil society action around social security/welfare benefits. One option raised was making shared civil society recommendations for the November 2017 Budget. A meeting was convened to consider this and around a dozen civil society organisations decided to be involved. A subsequent roundtable discussion was held and three shared recommendations were agreed. These were: reduce the Universal Credit[3] waiting time to two weeks, restore work allowances within Universal Credit and end the benefits freeze.[4] The three recommendations were based on consideration of problems with the current system and how they might be resolved, thus being solutions focused rather than just opposition to measures being proposed by government. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation and Trust for London provided funding to enable facilitation/coordination of the initiative (in the interests of transparency, that role was undertaken by the author of this article).

With the shared asks agreed, actions undertaken followed a typical influencing approach: what was different was having so many organisations saying the same thing. Thus, a letter with the three recommendations was sent to the Prime Minister. But rather than being sent by a single individual or organisation, it was signed by Chief Executives of 13 organisations: Child Poverty Action Group, Church Action on Poverty, Community Links, Disability Rights UK, Equality Trust, Fawcett Society, Gingerbread, Refugee Council, Shelter, Children's Society, Trust for London, Women's Aid, Women's Budget Group. A joint letter to the *Sunday Times*, which also featured in a linked article in the same newspaper, had even more signatories, with the Family and Childcare Trust and Mental Health Foundation being added. A briefing for MPs was produced with fourteen organisations' logos on it. An online evidence base was created. A non-branded graphic was designed and hashtags agreed, with suggested dates for tweeting and retweeting. Organisations shared individually produced evidence and briefings and other activity was undertaken by organisations on an individual basis. In terms of adding more voices, a letter reinforcing the three recommendations, signed by over a hundred academics, was published in the *Daily Telegraph*.

The initiative can thus be seen to have been based on collaborative working and the asks reflected a solutions focus i.e. suggesting remedies not simply identifying problems: but what of a participatory approach? The initiative cannot be said to have been participatory but a first step was taken in involving people with lived experience in future work. In short, two lived experience groups were approached and a discussion session was held with each, addressing the question *What changes would you like to see made to social security/welfare benefits in the Budget that will be announced on 22 November 2017?* The format of the sessions was: welcome and introductions; two Youtube clips about the Budget; a warm-up exercise, thinking about positives and negatives with the current social security/welfare benefits system; small group work to develop ideas on the session question; a prioritising exercise with each participant voting for the five ideas they thought most important; close and feedback. Each session had 12 participants.

There were two key outcomes from the discussion sessions. First was that a very wide range of issues were raised, pointing to experts by experience seeing how much is wrong with the current system and how much needs to be done to improve it. A total of 23 ideas were identified in one session and 21 in the other. The prioritising exercise produced two highlighted ideas in one session (scrap the work capability assessment; end the use of external companies) and three in the other (rent support to be paid direct to landlords; simplify the claims system; stop cuts to health services). The highlighted ideas were therefore different between the two sessions and different to the three recommendations made by the organisations. However, their significance should not be over stated as even within the individual sessions only one of the ideas was prioritised by more than half the participants. To emphasise, it was the range of issues raised and how much needs to be done to improve the social security/welfare benefits system that was primarily evident.

The second outcome was the enthusiasm expressed by participants for involvement in further work. This led to some participants attending the post-Budget project evaluation meeting alongside professionals from other organisations who had been involved. It also led to a key learning point which will be discussed below.

In terms of what happened with the November 2017 Budget, it was a pretty miserable statement by the Chancellor of the Exchequer but with one notable exception; an additional £1.5 billion was allocated to Universal Credit. In the context of overall problems with social security, and Universal Credit in particular, an additional £1.5 billion is a small step. But it was not planned on prior to the Budget and will put money in the pockets of people who need it. The importance of that should not be underestimated and as one person at the post-Budget evaluation meeting commented: "£1.5 billion was moved into benefits. When was the last time that happened?"

But did the civil society initiative in any way contribute to this outcome? Answering that question forms part of the discussion of key learning points.

### Three learning points for future work

The first key learning point relates to participatory approaches and the importance of ensuring that in any future work people with lived experience are involved from the outset. Trying to combine perspectives as the Budget initiative developed did not work. This would have been avoided by experts by experience being involved from the start. The initiative did demonstrate the enthusiasm of lived experience groups for such work and their involvement in the post-Budget evaluation was a positive step. That meeting also set a red line for future projects as having experts by experience involved from the outset and that is already happening in two subsequent pieces of work.

The second learning point is about collaborative working, and the importance of consensus building and a solutions focus to this. Adopting a consensus building approach meant that rather than one organisation deciding on asks and then seeking support from others, the initiative began with a blank piece of paper and all those involved developed the asks jointly. The outcomes of consensus building are often described as being ones that are nobody's ideal but with which everyone can live. That was certainly the case here and it meant organisations taking a broader perspective

rather than a narrow sectional approach. In facilitating the agreement that was achieved, the consensus building approach was critical. In addition, the solutions focus proved important. At the start of the initiative some concerns were expressed about whether discussions would get lost in competing organisational priorities, the interests of different client groups, abstract debates about all manner of possible options and so on: but the solutions focus meant efforts were concentrated on recommendations to remedy evident problems and points of agreement not disagreement. In the event, the three shared asks were arrived at in a very short timescale.
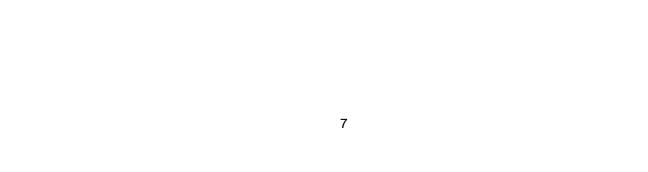
The third learning point is about theories of change and issues raised by the approach taken in the Budget initiative. If the initiative is evaluated on the basis of a belief in linear policy development, it was a failure i.e. three recommendations were made but none were implemented. If, however, the reality of messy and complex policy development is accepted, along with the theory that one way change happens is when lots of different people start saying the same thing, then another conclusion is reached. In short, it was evident that concern grew around the Budget, particularly in relation to Universal Credit, with this including media coverage, Parliamentary debate and questions being raised by some Conservative backbench MPs. The civil society initiative certainly contributed to that growing concern and pressure to act.

An issue this raises is how individual organisations in needing to demonstrate impact, both generally and in particular with funders, can do so if the kind of approach used in this initiative is followed. Information such as numbers of tweets/retweets, contact with MPs etc is easy to compile, but these are indicators of activity rather than evidence of impact. The key to this is understandings of policy development. A belief in linear policy development would suggest it is possible to identify individual factors that led to the £1.5 billion announcement and ascribe them to specific actors and actions. But if the reality of messy and complex policy development is recognised then such an approach is perhaps misplaced. This leads to a concluding reflection, as follows.

## **Conclusion**

Considering new approaches to anti-poverty action brings with it challenges. For researchers, the challenge is presented as being about breaking out of a well-rehearsed conversation and moving beyond the production of ever more evidence about problems that are only too well known. Organisations are challenged to be explicit about their guiding theory of change and reflect on the implications thereof for ways of working. For funders there is a challenge in how to approach the evaluation of projects based on an understanding of policy development as complex and messy rather than linear and one-dimensional.

But why should those concerned with poverty reduction consider new approaches around solutions focused, participative and collaborative working and engage with the challenges they present? To return to the point made at the start of this article, it is over 30 years since the UK had a poverty rate under 20 per cent and in the 21$^{st}$ century poverty has always been higher than it was in the 1960s and 70s. Given that poverty in the UK is so widespread, deep and embedded, perhaps the more pertinent question to ask is whether current approaches suffice?

**Notes**

1. Statistics compiled from IFS (2017) and JRF (2017). The definition of poverty in these statistics is based on the widely accepted and long-standing relative measure of 60 per cent of median income.

2. The UK Living Wage campaign was launched in 2001 to encourage employers to pay workers at a level to provide a basic but acceptable standard of living, based on a calculation taking into account a basket of essential goods and services. For further information see www.citizensuk.org/living_wage (website visited 25 October 2018).

3. Universal Credit has been discussed previously in this journal (e.g. Royston, 2012; Dwyer and Wright, 2014). It is a means-tested benefit for people of working-age which replaces six existing benefits. It was introduced in 2013 for new claimants, followed by rollout to existing recipients of relevant benefits. But Universal Credit has proved highly problematic and at the time of writing there are mounting calls for rollout to be at least paused.

4. A freeze on any increase in working-age benefits began in April 2016 and is not due to be reviewed until 2020. This means that as inflation rises the real value of benefits falls. The freeze is one of the key drivers of increasing poverty (JRF, 2017).

**References**

Beresford, P. (2017) 'Endless reports on rising poverty do little to change government policy – there's another way' *The Conversation* 11 December.

Dwyer, P. and Wright, S. (2014) 'Universal Credit, ubiquitous conditionality and its implications for social citizenship' *Journal of Poverty and Social Justice* 22(1): 27-35.

IFS (2017) *Living standards, poverty and inequality in the UK: 2017–18 to 2021–22* London: IFS.

Institute for Government (2011) *Policy making in the real world: evidence and analysis* London: Institute for Government.

JRF (2017) *UK Poverty 2017 York:* JRF.

Knight, B. (2013) 'Reframing Poverty' *Poverty* 146: 14-17.

Royston, S. (2012) 'Understanding Universal Credit' *Journal of Poverty and Social Justice* 20(1): 69-86.

Vexler, D. (2017) 'What exactly do we mean by systems?' *Stanford Social Innovation Review* 22 June.

Watson, J. (2016) 'Is the third sector failing?' *New Statesman* 21 October.

Williams, Z. (2015) *Get It Together* London: Hutchinson.