Your Voice, Your Say: Let's Talk Inequality
Cumbernauld

August 2020

The UWS-Oxfam Partnership and Cumbernauld Poverty Action

Project partners

The UWS-Oxfam Partnership

The Partnership brings together the academic expertise from the University of the West of Scotland, the social justice and anti-poverty campaigning strengths of Oxfam Scotland, and the local knowledge and capacities of a wide range of civil society organisations to conduct research and inform policy debates with the overarching objective to work together for a more equitable and sustainable Scotland. Find out more about the work of the partnership here: http://uwsoxfampartnership.org.uk/

Cumbernauld Poverty Action

Based at the Muirfield Centre, Cumbernauld Poverty Action is a registered charity which offers free and confidential advice regarding welfare rights, budgeting and housing issues. Find out more about our activities on our Facebook page here: https://www.facebook.com/Cumbernauldpovertyaction

About the project

Prior to the 2016 Scottish Parliament election, Oxfam Scotland produced policy priorities for the Scottish Parliament.[1] Ahead of the next Holyrood election in May 2021, Oxfam was keen to talk with people across Scotland to discover the issues they believe the next Parliament needs to address to help create "a just and equal Scotland, in a just and equal world."

To achieve this, we went to communities around the country to find out what mattered most to them. The project sought to build upon the Policy Forum model run by The UWS-Oxfam Partnership; this brings together decision-makers, policy professionals, community organisations and individuals to discuss key policy agendas. Critically, the workshops – *'Your Voice, Your Say: Let's Talk Inequality'* – were delivered in partnership with local organisations, and could not have happened without them. The focus was on the depth and quality of discussion, rather than the scale.

The conversations explored the meaning of inequality in Scotland today – including the gap between rich and poor; geographical inequalities; and inequalities between groups based on gender, race and ability – and what levers can be used at a devolved level to tackle inequality in its various forms. There is welcome political attention on tackling poverty in Scotland, but these conversations took a deeper look at the gap between the haves and the have-nots, and what can be done about it.

The aims of the workshops were:

- To engage with people who don't always feel heard and gain an understanding of their perceptions and priorities around tackling inequality in Scotland;

- To use these valuable contributions to help shape what we ask Scottish political parties to commit to in the lead up to the 2021 Scottish elections;

- To support participants to explore practical actions that could be taken locally to tackle inequalities or injustices in the local community.

> *"Structures are limiting people's voices" –*
> *workshop participant*

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[1] Oxfam Scotland (2016) *Even It Up: Scotland's role in tackling poverty by reducing inequality at home and abroad - Oxfam's policy priorities for the Scottish Parliament.* Available here: https://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/publications/even-it-up-scotlands-role-in-tackling-poverty-by-reducing-inequality-at-home-an-579309?utm_source=oxf.am&utm_medium=ZmmX&utm_content=redirect

What we did

Workshops across Scotland

The workshop which took place at Muirfield Community Centre, Cumbernauld on 12 March, 2020 was just one part of a much bigger project.

This project aimed to deliver eight workshops between January and April 2020 in the eight electoral regions of Scotland. Two of these workshops were cancelled due to the coronavirus pandemic, and an additional workshop was carried out with refugee and migrant women in Glasgow. The locations of the workshops were:

- **Central Scotland** – Cumbernauld, in partnership with Cumbernauld Poverty Action

- **Glasgow** – Paisley, in partnership with STAR Project; and Springburn in partnership with Saheliya

- **Highlands and Islands** – Inverness, in partnership with Inverness Foodstuff

- **Mid Scotland and Fife** – Kirkcaldy, in partnership with Fife Centre for Equalities

- **North East Scotland** – Dundee, in partnership with Dundee Fighting for Fairness Commission

- **West Scotland** – Greenock, in partnership with Your Voice, Inverclyde

- **South Scotland** – Dumfries, in partnership with Citizens Advice and Dumfries and Galloway Tackling Poverty Group [cancelled due to lockdown]

- **Lothian** – Edinburgh, in partnership with The Grassmarket Community Centre, Cyrenians and Edinburgh and Lothians Regional Equality Council [cancelled due to lockdown]

Participants

The workshops were open to the public, however, through our project partners we particularly sought to engage with low income groups, marginalised communities, and those with lived experience of poverty in recognition that they are too often under-represented within policy-making. The workshop participants tended to be a mix of people with direct experience of poverty and

professionals or service providers with an interest in the topic (for example Citizens Advice staff, NHS workers, grassroots/community organisations and policy professionals).

The workshop held at Muirfield Community Centre in Cumbernauld had 11 participants in attendance, including 7 women and 4 men. This workshop had a slightly older age demographic than those in other parts of Scotland, with 6 of the participants over 60. All of the participants were white, one of whom was born outside of the UK. One participant was disabled. There was a mixture of professionals representing local services and members of the public.

Four staff from the UWS-Oxfam Partnership and Cumbernauld Poverty Action helped to facilitate, and the Chair of the Scotland-wide Poverty and Inequality Commission,[2] a statutory body which provides independent advice and scrutiny to Scottish Ministers on poverty and inequality, also attended to hear the discussions.
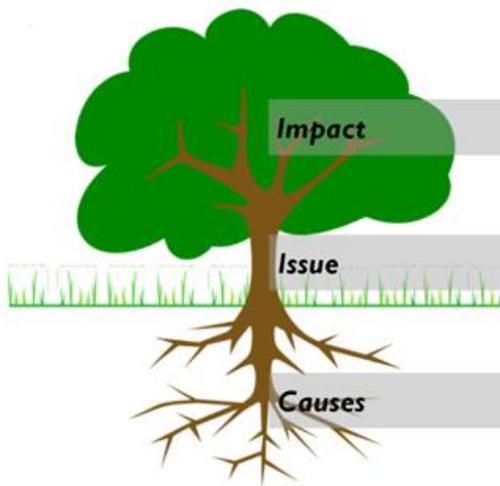
Format of the workshop

The workshop was split into five stages:

1) **Exploring what is meant by 'inequality'** – Inequality is a complicated topic and means something different to everyone. The first ice breaker exercise aimed to help people to get to know one another and begin to explore this topic. The workshop began with a brainstorm around the question "what does inequality mean to you?"

2) **Inequality of what between whom?** – In the second stage, participants were presented with some information about income and wealth inequality in Scotland and asked to choose one topic per group to explore in more detail. To do this, participants were asked to think about inequality *of what* (for example, income, wealth, health, power) and *between whom* (for example, the population of Scotland, women and men, or countries of the world).

3) **Exploring the causes and the impacts –** When groups had decided on a topic to discuss, they were asked to map the causes of that kind of inequality, and the impacts resulting from it, using a 'problem tree' visual aid.

4) **Exploring the solutions –** Following the mapping exercise, groups were asked to think about any changes, big or small, that could make a positive difference to the causes or impacts that they had mapped.

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[2] https://povertyinequality.scot/

5) **Local action –** Choosing one of the solutions they had identified, groups then spent the final part of the workshop brainstorming actions that could be taken at a local or national level to achieve change.

Impact

Issue

Causes

Goal
Longer term change you want to make

Outcomes
Changes would be required to move towards that goal

Campaign tactics
What can be done locally or nationally to achieve those changes

Goal:

What MEAN

Inequality of: .... POWER
Between: .... IN SCOTLAND

Causes

Impact

TAKING STOCK BUT NOT (NO) LONGER REDISTRIBUTING

FEAR OF LETTING GO

DISEMPOWERED GROUPS LACKING ACCESS INFLUENCING

CONSULTATIONS DO NOT INFLUENCE DECISION MAKING

SAME POL BENEFITING

DISTRUST

DISENGAGE

IMPLEMENTATION

What we heard

Initial thoughts on inequality

Inequality is a complex concept, which may refer to inequality of wealth or income, inequality of opportunity, health inequalities or educational inequalities. It may be driven by inequalities between groups based on gender, race, education, or generational cohort, or it may be driven by inequalities within these groups. It is important to ask ourselves: "inequality of what, and amongst whom?".

To unpack some of this complexity, the workshop began with a brainstorm based around the question: what does inequality mean to you?" It was clear from the outset that the participants of the workshop had strong views on what inequality meant and spoke very eloquently about its causes and consequences.

Some themes that emerged from the group discussions included:

- **Housing**

- **Access to work, finances and cost of living: poverty enhances inequality, fuel poverty, food poverty, use of food banks**

- **Regional differences within towns and cities and postcodes**

- **Global inequality – regional differences**

- **Childcare**

- **Wealth / financial inequality**

- **Decision making power – Inequality of participation and involvement**

- **Gender inequality in the workplace**

- **Knowledge inequality – Having knowledge about access to services and financial inclusion schemes, and being able to use that knowledge.**

Causes and Impacts

Based on their brainstorm, the groups were asked to choose a theme so that they could explore the causes and impacts of inequality in more detail. To do this, the groups were given stickers which read: "inequality of [BLANK] between/in [BLANK]." The theme chosen was:

Inequality of POWER between AUTHORITIES/INSTITUTIONS and PEOPLE

The groups used a "problem tree" visual aid to map the causes, impacts and solutions to this particular manifestation of inequality.

Inequality of POWER between AUTHORITIES/INSTITUTIONS and PEOPLE		
Causes	**Impacts**	**Solutions**
- Failure of people in power to engage with people - Solutions are top down – community has not got a voice - Structures are limiting people's voices - People aren't being consulted - Biased information provision – no information on pros and cons (of actions of authorities) for community - Authorities feel they know better - Their ears aren't open – they don't want to hear [people in power] - It's a broken system - Voices of those in poverty suppressed - Local authorities have cut services - Welfare rights and advocacy organisations not being funded - Funding for support services stopped	- Priorities of authorities [and people] not aligned - People haven't got enough money to spend on accessing services miles away [because local services have closed] - People without money can't travel to other services [further away] [Closure of services, lack of advice etc] Detrimental to health leads to health inequalities [The orgs that are funded / DWP] not enough capacity to help people access [what they are entitled to] - Only 4 welfare rights offices - Too hard to access [services] - Homelessness - Mental health problems - Welfare people not qualified – don't know processes in welfare rights - Information isn't clear from authorities - Zero-hour contracts	- Decisions made locally with involvement of local people - Improve transparency e.g. housing balloting for people in housing association accommodation was supposed only to be used when governance is changing. However, tenants are being balloted. Biased information is being provided by those in power for their own benefits [so housing company can do what they want by not giving pros and cons of voting each way] - Authorities need to listen - Local community council and planning engage in local anti-poverty strategies. - Better system to feed solutions from community - Independent tenant advisors who are impartial (not currently impartial and we don't get information in writing).

• Withdrawal of funding leaving people in limbo • Decisions are made out of regions [not made locally] • Differences between regions re: access to services/advice • [People] Not able to talk through practicalities • Services vary across regions [due to closures in some areas] • Authorities don't tell people how to access the money they are entitled to • Money is going to the wrong services and places – e.g. housing, not enough money going to people • Ill people can't travel [to access services] • Not enough childcare • Even organisations "helping" have barriers limiting access • Exclusion of people from benefits (not met criteria) • Barriers to communication [limiting] practical action	• People are worse off working due to cost of transport.	• Decentralise services to understand local issues and give locals power • Information • Help people to ask the right questions • Comprehensive information, accessible to help people make decisions (impartial) • Engage with communities • Free bus travel for people going back to work. • Scottish housing regulator who you can phone and who sends information in writing [so people can read and understand in their own time]

Solutions

For the final exercise of the workshop, participants were asked to focus on what needs to change and how to change it. Groups were asked to decide on one solution to the problems they had identified, and brainstorm some of the steps that would be required to achieve that goal.

Goal: Information, Transparency & decision making

Outcomes (what has to change?):
- Engage individuals
- Partnership between organisations and people

- Mobilise community – mechanisms dampen spirit – provide alternative sources of information – break data down so it demonstrates what is needed
- Stop manipulating data which is hiding/distorting issues and provide accurate information to people for decision making.

Campaigning (how to do it):
- Creative ways to engage people:
    - Creative writing – conversations between locals and authorities to make information accessible
    - Local radio
- Bring people together – community events (with food!)
- Build trust between MSPs and local community
- Switch the tables – not listen to the MSP but the MSP listens to the community.
- People who are appointed are representative
- CHEX – Community Health Exchange – courses on local decision making, how to raise your voice, activism e.g. essay writing course in Napier College which is online, you can get credits
- Activities in the community to build trust

"Build trust between MSPs and local community" – workshop participant

Summary

The workshop at Muirfield Community Centre in Cumbernauld on 12 March, 2020 involved a lively discussion amongst participants, facilitators and local service providers about the causes and impacts of inequality in Scotland today, and what can be done about it. The session ended with reflections from Bill Scott, Chair of the Poverty and Inequality Commission, on what he had heard during the workshop.

Although conversations touched on many policy areas, cutting across both reserved and devolved powers, there were some threads that ran throughout the discussions and some clear priorities emerged:

1) **Power, decision making and participation –** Participants spoke about barriers to participation in politics and how disempowered groups lack access to influencing opportunities. They felt that decisions are "top down" and that the community had no voice. They attributed this to a failure of people in power to engage and consult people in a meaningful way because "authorities feel they know better". They wanted to see decisions made locally (not regionally), with the involvement of local people and comprehensive, accessible, impartial information to help people make decisions.

2) **Access and availability of services –** Participants spoke about reduced availability of services and difficulties accessing services due to lack of information and transport. They were concerned about regional disparities in service provision, cuts to Local Authority budgets and the knock-on impact this has for voluntary sector services such as welfare rights and advocacy organisations. They felt that "money is going to the wrong services and places" for example not enough on childcare. They felt that a lack of knowledge and information meant people were unaware of the services available to them and that the organisations that are properly funded still don't have the capacity to help people to access what they are entitled to. Transport serves as a further barrier where people are unable to afford public transport or unable to travel due to poor health or disabilities. Participants spoke about how closure of services and lack of advice leads to health inequalities, and wanted to see: local councils engage the community in local anti-poverty strategies; and people equipped with the knowledge about how to access services and financial inclusion schemes.

3) **Housing –** Participants felt that housing was central to inequality in Scotland, and mentioned poor housing quality, affordability, and homelessness as particular concerns. They wanted to see: independent tenant advisors who are impartial; better engagement of tenants in the governance of social housing; and for a service provided by the Scottish housing regulator which provides information and phonelines to help tenants resolve their issues.

Since this workshop was held, the country and the world has been shaken by a global pandemic which has had – and will continue to have – far reaching health and economic consequences. The COVID-19 crisis has exacerbated and laid bare existing inequalities in our communities, making it all the more vital that we take steps now to mitigate a widening gap between rich and poor. Next year's Scottish Parliament election presents an opportunity for political parties to renew their commitments to tackling poverty and inequality by making bold commitments which prioritise the health, wellbeing and financial security of all of Scotland's people. In doing so, the findings of this workshop – and those held across Scotland as part of this project – provide valuable ideas to support the creation of a more just and equal Scotland.

"Help people to ask the right questions" – workshop participant