

# Improving support for families in poverty

## Applying the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach

September 2011

People experiencing poverty are often categorised in terms of what they are lacking, their failures and their problems. This research project demonstrates that taking a holistic approach which looks at what people have, and what they already do to cope with poverty, can help practitioners to support individuals and families more effectively.

### Research background and aims

The Key Family Research Project, led by ATD Fourth World with funding from Oxfam, used the 'Sustainable Livelihoods Approach' (SLA – see over) to map the lives of families experiencing poverty and social exclusion in two deprived London boroughs. The SLA looks at what people have and what they already do to cope with poverty, as well as any external barriers and opportunities they may face, in order to seek ways of bringing about positive change in their situation. Interviews were carried out with seven individuals from two families already working with ATD Fourth World's Family Support Programme, and then analysed using the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach. The project aimed to contribute to the Family Support Programme through:

- Building a holistic picture of the lives of families in the context of their local communities.
- Focusing on the assets and strengths within the household and the community, and on individuals' decisions and actions, to begin to address the challenges being faced by the family.
- Identifying external opportunities and constraints that impact upon people's lives due, for example, to changes in local services or in government policy.
- Identifying the family's own priority areas for action as a starting point for providing support.

- Informing partnerships with professionals from local and statutory service providers involved in the support of these families.

### What we found

#### 1. The value of focusing on positives and building a bigger picture

The emphasis on people's 'assets' and positive strategies gives a fuller understanding of an individual's or family's situation and what they can build on.

#### 2. Better targeting of support

Exploring the interaction between different assets – and who has access to them within a household – enables better targeting of support to individual family members.

#### 3. Improved motivation and relationships

The participatory techniques used proved empowering for both researchers and interviewees, and relationships between them improved as a result. The interviews encouraged participants to focus on the positives in their lives and consider next steps to improve their situation.

#### 4. Campaigning issues highlighted

The research provided fresh insight into the experience of poverty in London and how this intersects with the broader decisions of government and other organisations, which will feed into ATD Fourth World's campaigning and policy work.

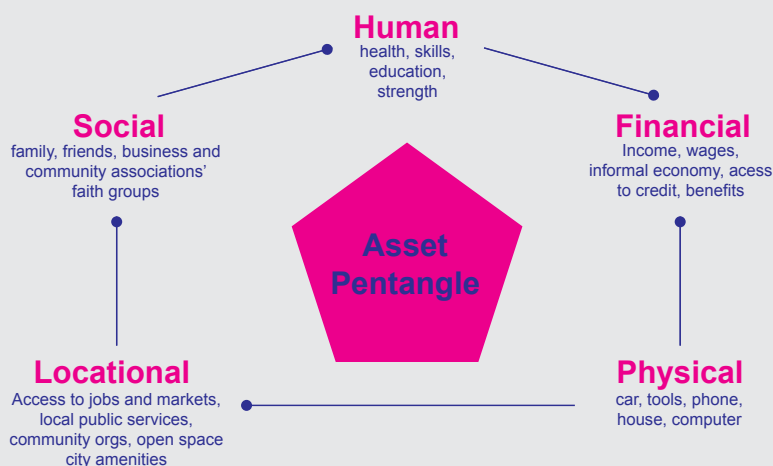
"It helped me and really made me think about stuff that I hadn't thought of before. It made me realise that I shouldn't just spend my money every week like I had been doing, without thinking. If I could manage to do everything that we planned, like putting money on one side for a deposit, then we would all be much better off in the future." Connor, research participant



## The Sustainable Livelihoods Approach

The Sustainable Livelihoods Approach takes as its starting point not deprivation but 'assets': the strengths and capabilities of people living in poverty, and the strategies they use to get by through drawing on these different assets. This understanding is then considered in the light of the multitude of factors that have an effect on people's vulnerability to poverty, including household dynamics, local services and national policy.

### Assets + Strategies = Livelihood



People have strategies to get by – they make rational choices and weigh risks

## Methodology

The project ran from October 2009 to March 2010, with four distinct stages:

- **Planning** and familiarisation with the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach.
- **Mapping** the local context to identify available services and relevant policies.
- **Interviews** with the seven participants carried out by members of the Family Support Programme. Care was taken to ensure optimum conditions for interviews, and permission sought in advance for recordings and transcripts to be made available to the team of the Family Support Programme.
- **Analysis** of the interviews (see below).
- **Feedback** to the interviewees, including a feedback folder with practical information about relevant local services and a written reminder of interview analysis, including suggested next steps or goals.

## Analysis of interviews

Interviews were analysed against categories identified in the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach: assets, strategies and barriers, and vulnerabilities.

### 1. Assets

The strengths or assets identified in the interviews were grouped under the following categories: human, financial, physical, locational, and social (see diagram above).

### 2. Strategies and barriers

The interview process also documented the strategies that people were using to help them get by (eg. relying on other family members for support in a crisis), and the barriers that were preventing them from moving forward (eg lack of affordable childcare).

### 3. Vulnerabilities

As well as noting some of the 'shocks' that constituted major events in the life of the individual or household (for example, a parent or child falling ill), this part of the analysis also explored the external trends that impacted on people's lives but were beyond the control of the individual or household (for example, one family was living in a flat that was due for demolition, but they had little control over when or where they would be rehoused). These issues would need to be addressed by ATD Fourth World at a campaigning level rather than through the Family Support Programme itself.

## Advantages of using the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach

- Interviews are empowering in themselves. The approach gives participants the time for reflection and it documents their achievements, as well as the struggles and challenges that are holding them back. It also gives them an opportunity to articulate their aspirations and ambitions in both the long and short term.
- The approach enables families to identify their own priority areas for action, which in turn helps them to formulate and agree future steps in their support. The active participation of families in planning their own support is motivating, and increases its effectiveness.
- Information gathered about local facilities and services is useful for families and those involved in their support plan. It highlights issues around availability, affordability and accessibility of services and structures designed to support vulnerable families.
- It provides a deeper understanding of the global situation of a family. It fills gaps in knowledge about participants' work experience, skills and qualifications, benefits they claim etc.
- The approach gives an insight into the networks of family and friends that also offer support, and a more detailed exploration of how people depend upon and look out for each other. It emphasises the different kinds of assets that people have to draw on and the strategies that they use to make the best of what they have.
- It explores the interaction between assets and who has access to them within a household. This enables better targeting of support to individual family members, and an appreciation of the impact this has on the whole family.
- The approach analyses the barriers and challenges that different members of a family face. This differentiates between what people have the potential to overcome with additional support, and factors beyond their control (eg changes in policy or in service provision).
- It provides an opportunity to highlight issues that would benefit from early intervention to prevent problems in the longer term.

### CASE STUDY SEEING THE BIGGER PICTURE

**Connor is 23 and overcame many challenges caused by poverty to train as a mechanic. At the moment he is working full-time. He and his partner Becca (19) have a three-year-old daughter, Olivia. When Becca left local authority care at 16 she was given a flat where the young family were allowed to live only until she turned 18. They were then re-housed onto an estate where there was a lot of crime, so they chose to leave and moved in with Becca's father, Samuel (61).**

The interviews gave Connor, Becca and Samuel the time to think about their current situation and express some of their hopes for the future. They also presented the ATD Fourth World team with the opportunity to highlight different issues that could pose problems in the longer term and plan a way to tackle them together.

#### **Assets and vulnerability**

Even though Connor has a job and a regular income, he also has a poor credit history, no savings (financial asset) and has never had a home of his own. Becca and Connor live in Samuel's flat (physical asset) but Samuel is the only registered occupant, so the couple have no recognised rights as tenants. As a result, they are entirely dependent on Samuel's continued occupancy of the flat.

While Connor has a regular salary, Becca only receives Child Benefit for Olivia into her own bank

account (financial asset). She is entitled to claim Child Tax Credits but was not doing so at the time of the interview. Connor was not even officially registered as living with his partner and their daughter at this time, leaving them in the vulnerable position of having no financial assets of their own outside of a small amount of Child Benefit.

#### **Identifying next steps**

The understanding, provided by the interviews, of who had ownership of the physical and financial assets within the household, and the limited access of the other members of the household to these assets, led to the planning of crucial next steps in the family's support programme. In Connor's case, the following areas were highlighted as possible next steps to building a more secure future:

- Declare to the local authority that he and Becca were living as a couple at Samuel's flat, and make a contribution to the rent.
- Make an application for Working Tax Credit to see if they were entitled to any extra money.
- Together with Becca, get some advice about paying off their debts as a couple.
- Start to put some money away as regular savings for the future (holidays, deposit on a flat, etc).
- Start the training to get his HGV license.

## Using the SLA approach

The Sustainable Livelihoods Approach is a way of looking at poverty which has its origins in Oxfam's international development work. Oxfam has been working with partners in the UK since 2003 to explore what this approach can bring to anti-poverty initiatives here.

The ATD Fourth World/Oxfam project clearly demonstrated the value of the SLA approach in working with, and supporting, vulnerable individuals and families. It can help people to more effectively identify the positive assets they have and can build on, and find strategies to overcome barriers and problems. As such, we believe it can be a powerful tool for those involved in support, service delivery, and policy making with individuals and families living in poverty, and can be relevant to the work of a variety of staff in community and voluntary groups, support agencies, and local authority departments. At the moment, Oxfam is continuing to explore the use of SLA in developing small enterprises with women, and supporting those in the informal economy to set up formal businesses.

## ATD Fourth World

ATD Fourth World is a human rights based, anti-poverty organisation with more than 40 years' experience engaging with individuals and institutions to combat poverty in the UK. Its Family Support Programme has two central aims: focusing on the positives in the families' lives to support them in working through their difficulties, step by step; and creating the conditions that will allow families and the professionals involved in their lives to work together, learn from one another, and build positive relationships.

## Oxfam in the UK

Oxfam has been working to end poverty in the UK since 1996. Today, together with our partners, we're making sure people have enough to live on, and we're changing the lives of men, women and children across the UK. We develop projects with people in poverty to enable them to improve their lives and have a say in the decisions that affect them; we raise public awareness of poverty to create the pressure that is necessary for change; and we lobby government for policies that will tackle the root causes of poverty.

## Read the full report

The Key Family Research Project discussed in this paper was completed in 2010, and explores how the approach can be integrated into the work of an existing service, the ATD Family Support Project. The full report *This Is My Life: Improving support for families in poverty with the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach* is available to download at [www.oxfam.org.uk/policyandpractice](http://www.oxfam.org.uk/policyandpractice)

## Other resources

*Community Assets First: the Implications of the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach for the Coalition Agenda*, Church Action on Poverty, IPPR North, Oxfam, Urban Forum, 2011.

*The Sustainable Livelihoods Handbook: An Asset Based Approach to Poverty*, Oxfam GB and Church Action on Poverty, 2009

*Voices for a Change*, ATD Fourth World, 2008.

Available to download at [www.atd-uk.org/resources/uk/](http://www.atd-uk.org/resources/uk/)

*Sustainable Livelihoods Approach DVD*, Church Action on Poverty and Oxfam, 2009

## Contact us

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To read the full report and for further information about Oxfam's work using the SLA to address poverty in the UK contact Lucy Brill, Oxfam UK Poverty Programme. Email: [lbrill@oxfam.org.uk](mailto:lbrill@oxfam.org.uk) or [ukpoverty@oxfam.org.uk](mailto:ukpoverty@oxfam.org.uk) [www.oxfam.org.uk/ukpoverty](http://www.oxfam.org.uk/ukpoverty)

Names have been changed to protect participants' identities.

**"The Sustainable Livelihoods Approach helps policymakers to understand how people in poverty get by in resourceful ways. This enables policy to support these coping strategies, and increases the likelihood that resources will be used effectively to create positive outcomes."**

Julie Jarman, Director of Oxfam's UK Poverty Programme in England

**"The Sustainable Livelihoods Approach is about families and those who support them deciding, together, where they're heading. It looks at the things that people can build on, and their own priorities – not what external agencies think their priorities should be. It has huge potential as a method to involve families in designing their own support."**

Sarah Kenningham, National Coordination Team, ATD Fourth World