



## Poverty and Social Exclusion in the UK

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**Community engagement in  
challenging times**

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# Poverty and Social Exclusion in the UK

## Overview

The Poverty and Social Exclusion in the UK Project is funded by the Economic, Science and Research Council (ESRC). The Project is a collaboration between the University of Bristol, University of Glasgow, Heriot Watt University, Open University, Queen's University (Belfast), University of York, the National Centre for Social Research and the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency. The project commenced in April 2010 and will run for three-and-a-half years.

The primary purpose is to advance the 'state of the art' of the theory and practice of poverty and social exclusion measurement. In order to improve current measurement methodologies, the research will develop and repeat the 1999 Poverty and Social Exclusion Survey. This research will produce information of immediate and direct interest to policy makers, academics and the general public. It will provide a rigorous and detailed independent assessment on progress towards the UK Government's target of eradicating child poverty.

### Objectives

This research has three main objectives:

- To improve the measurement of poverty, deprivation, social exclusion and standard of living
- To assess changes in poverty and social exclusion in the UK
- To conduct policy-relevant analyses of poverty and social exclusion

For more information and other papers in this series, visit [www.poverty.ac.uk](http://www.poverty.ac.uk)

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### ***The collaboration partners:***

*Community groups:* Grace Women's Development LTD, Ardoyne, Belfast; Cregagh Community Association, Belfast; Donegall Pass Community Forum, Belfast; Doury Road Development Group, Ballymena; Taghnevan Community Development Association, Lurgan; Lettershandoney District Development Group, Derry; The Villages Together, Co Tyrone; Fountain Street and Springhill Community Development Associations, Strabane

*CFNI:* CiA project worker Geraldine Wilkins

*Open University:* PSE Community engagement lead, Gabi Kent

*Queens University:* PSE NI academic team Mike Tomlinson, Grace Kelly, Paddy Hillyard and Mary Daly

### ***About the Author***

Gabi Kent is a member of the PSE team (Open University) and responsible for enhancing community engagement with PSE research. She is also a filmmaker, researcher and consultant in the field of human rights, who specializes in using media as a tool for social change. For more information contact: [gabikent.gk@gmail.com](mailto:gabikent.gk@gmail.com)

## Contents

Summary .....	5
Introduction .....	6
The Northern Ireland pilot .....	7
Bringing it all together; a new model for 'local to national' research .....	13
Conclusion; making poverty research meaningful .....	15
References .....	17

## Summary

Public engagement and knowledge exchange with key stakeholders are considered important aspects of academic research and seen as vital to influencing policy and practice (Benneworth, 2013; ESRC, 2013; RCUK, 2013). Key questions for us as poverty researchers and knowledge brokers were how to engage low-income communities in the PSE's wide scale research and how to make poverty research more 'meaningful' or beneficial to these low-income communities and their advocates. This working paper describes an experimental collaboration between members of the Poverty and Social Exclusion project (PSE), the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland and communities from some of the most deprived wards in Northern Ireland during a period of unprecedented social welfare changes. This engagement process devised and tested in collaboration with these communities, presents one model for building partnerships between national research projects and local low-income and hard to reach individuals, communities and their advocates, as part of a mutually beneficial process.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on a paper presented by the author at the SPA conference in Sheffield, July 2013. It documents a pilot engagement process between early 2012 and September 2013 and draws on research field notes and observations during community workshops, project meetings and semi structured interviews with key participants in Sept/Oct 2012 and again in June– Sept 2013.

## Introduction

Public and community engagement is a rapidly expanding field and as Benneworth (2013) notes, is recognized as an 'increasingly important element of the role of universities in contemporary society'. In practice, there are many barriers restricting community engagement, particularly engagement with marginalized and socially excluded communities<sup>2</sup>. Hardening attitudes<sup>3</sup>, stigmatizing discourses and the biggest social welfare reforms for sixty years have exacerbated these barriers, in the case of poverty research, generating a climate of fear amongst people on low income who bear the brunt of these policies. The PSE team undertaking qualitative research in Northern Ireland for example, reported a heightened atmosphere of apprehension and suspicion which they associated with impending welfare reform changes and Northern Ireland's vulnerability to cuts in welfare and public sector spending<sup>4</sup>. This presents a uniquely challenging situation for academics and community groups and their advocates working in the field of poverty research. By effectively reducing the number of alternative discourses in the public realm, a worrying knowledge gap is also being created between those devising policy and those who are the subject of its interventions.

As part of our commitment to public engagement, the PSE has sought to create a model or process to connect low income communities with the PSE's research, to amplify their voices by linking their local experiences to a national research project and to share their findings via digital media tools, such as the PSE website.

In early 2012, an opportunity arose for PSE teams at the Open University and Queens University, Belfast and the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland (CFNI)<sup>5</sup> to work together on a pilot collaboration as part of a mutually beneficial process. The PSE would provide academic support and expertise to the CFNI's existing *Communities in Action* project in which low-income and marginalized communities document the impact of welfare reforms. This process in turn would, it was hoped, provide local experiential data to enrich the PSE's statistical data. Through this pilot collaboration PSE team members also sought to answer a number of research questions regarding community engagement, namely:

- How to engage low-income communities in a wide-scale research project?
- How to build capacities for research and encourage communities to choose the issues they want to cover and publicize?
- What research and digital tools best support communities in this process?
- Can this pilot collaboration provide a model for community engagement, to make poverty research more meaningful to low income communities?

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<sup>2</sup> Benneworth et al 2009; Benneworth, Ed, 2013

<sup>3</sup> Clery, et al., 2013, Lawles and Fox, 2001

<sup>4</sup> Daly and Kelly, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> CFNI is an independent charitable grantmaking trust which supports work in areas of deprivation and with disadvantaged groups across Northern Ireland. As outlined on their website, 'The Communities in Action Programme was established by CFNI in recognition of the vulnerability of local communities in light of current UK Government welfare policies and public expenditure cuts and the impact of deep recession. It offers funding for community based action projects run by, and for, people who may be experiencing disadvantage and/or marginalization'. CFNI funding for the Communities in Action project has been supplemented the BBC's Children in Need Trust. For more information go to: [www.communityfoundationni.org/Programmes/Communities-in-Action-](http://www.communityfoundationni.org/Programmes/Communities-in-Action-) Accessed August 2013

## The Northern Ireland pilot

Growing numbers of us are living 'on or below the breadline', with 33% of the UK population multiply deprived in 2012 compared to 14% in 1983. In Northern Ireland, the situation for people on low income is particularly bleak with 36% of the population multiply deprived<sup>6</sup>. This is due in part to the particular socio-demographic characteristics of Northern Ireland - a higher proportion of households with children and a higher proportion of household income which is sourced from welfare benefits. High poverty levels are also linked to the Northern Ireland conflict and its legacy<sup>7</sup>.

The Community Foundation for Northern Ireland set up the Communities in Action (CiA) programme in late 2011 as a three year project to 'chart experiences of deprivation, disadvantage, poverty and marginalization and to ascertain the impact of the proposed changes to welfare on people's lives'.<sup>8</sup> Participating community groups are located in areas of high deprivation across Northern Ireland and represent a wide range of constituents.<sup>9</sup> These are profoundly diverse locations ranging from rural villages and isolated housing estates to urban communities strictly bounded by postcodes. Many are segregated communities, divided along strict religious boundaries, situated within predominantly Protestant or Catholic areas. CiA funding is channeled through these community groups, and local community practitioners lead the projects and provide the primary interface between local people and the CFNI and the PSE. Community practitioners in most cases are members of their local community, some share common experiences of low income. All but two are paid workers.

These community groups, like other community development groups across the UK, have unique insider access to people living in poverty and can be both a source of community support and the conduit through which local concerns are presented in the public domain. As such, they are important stakeholders for public engagement with poverty research, to exchange knowledge and to inform policy and practice.<sup>10</sup>

### ***Forging a common language***

From the outset we were faced with the challenge of how to fuse two separate approaches into a new model for community engagement suited to supporting low-income communities conducting their own research.

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<sup>6</sup> PSE 2013

<sup>7</sup> DSDNI 2010, Hillyard et al., 2003

<sup>8</sup> Queens University, which has strong links with local community organizations, was asked to join the CiA advisory board. The Open University (OU) joined forces with Queens and CFNI in early 2012 to develop this experimental engagement project. For more information see: [www.poverty.ac.uk/community/northern-ireland/communities-action](http://www.poverty.ac.uk/community/northern-ireland/communities-action) (accessed May 26th, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> The community groups are located in: Ardoyne, Cregagh and Donegall Pass in Belfast, Doury Road in County Antrim, Fountain Street and Springhill Park in Strabane, Lettershandoney and The Villages together project in County Derry/London Derry and Taghnevan in County Armagh.

<sup>10</sup> Queens University leads the PSE academic research in Northern Ireland. The Open University leads the public and community engagement and web based dissemination side of the PSE project.

The Poverty and Social Exclusion UK is a major academic research project which applies a statistically rigorous approach to measuring poverty and social exclusion using two large-scale survey tools (an 'attitudes to necessities' and a living standards survey)<sup>11</sup>. A wide range of qualitative and quantitative tools complements this approach. In contrast, CFNI is a philanthropic organization with a strong tradition of community development and peace building initiatives and their Communities in Action (CiA) programme is best understood as a form of participatory action research. Its aim is to enable communities to monitor 'the impact of government reforms' and to provide funding for community based action projects 'run by, and for, people who may be experiencing disadvantage and/or marginalization'. For the communities involved there was a need to ensure that the research process was meaningful. Here meaningful was articulated by one practitioner as '*not just research or talking but that it leads to action*'<sup>12</sup>. As another community practitioner noted:

*"People need to see that there is going to be an outcome. That they are not doing this for nothing", (Community practitioner, Belfast)*

Tools and an accompanying process were needed that suited local needs and built capacities amongst community practitioners and participants to document the current situation and the impact of welfare policies as they continue to unfold. Practitioners highlighted a number of concerns with bringing traditional academic approaches into their communities:

*'I think universities and academia forget people don't have the literacy skills – older generation don't like to write and worry about spelling'*  
(Community practitioner Belfast)

The proposed process of conducting research and utilizing digital media tools also raised ethical issues for practitioners such as how to broker trust amongst their constituents, cautious in the wake of negative media representation. Conversely the value of gathering and sharing community evidence was well recognized. In the words of one practitioner,

*"Evidence helps to galvanize public support. That's what can make the difference", (Community practitioner, Derry in 2012)*

A systematic process of gathering experiential data, identifying and documenting key themes and disseminating these local experiences alongside national statistical data was collectively developed and refined. Anonymity, simplicity and sustainability provided the core framework for this process, in line with community needs.

Quantitative methods such as anonymised surveys were ruled out by community practitioners, in early meetings, as reminiscent of formal data collection practices used by the state and academia. These methods also raised concerns about anonymity and

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<sup>11</sup> The PSE uses two survey sets in its measurement of poverty and social exclusion the public attitudes survey on necessities and the Living standards survey. The attitudinal survey is a survey into the public's perceptions of necessities and attitudes to services. The living standards to examine the nature, extent and causes of deprivation and social exclusion For more information see <http://www.poverty.ac.uk/pse-research/pse-uk-2012> accessed 28th May 2013

<sup>12</sup> Community practitioners were asked what in this project would make poverty research meaningful during a series of one to one semi structured interviews in September/October 2012

data collection when carried out by practitioners who were from that community.<sup>13</sup> Rather, our partners CFNI and community practitioners suggested community conversations' or focus group discussions as the best approach to build trust in the research process.

A core imperative when devising the pilot project was to empower communities to produce their own media evidence and digital stories for targeted lobbying and advocacy work with CFNI. One of the current debates around gathering and sharing personal stories or 'digital storytelling' is how to ensure these stories are heard and inform policy and practice.<sup>14</sup> To support wider dissemination of community findings and stories, the PSE offered to provide a platform for community findings on the PSE's website, to amplify these voices and provide credibility through links with the wider PSE project.

Through a process of discussions, between the CFNI project worker, community practitioners and members of the PSE team a simple model was developed. This entailed:

1. Qualitative data collection methods: Community run focus groups or 'community conversations' with discussions linked to PSE's national research question sets
2. Community led digital evidence gathering and story telling based on focus group findings resulting in short films for lobbying and awareness raising
3. Connecting local findings to national research through community webpages on the PSE's website (Digital dissemination).

CFNI would lead, coordinate and manage the ongoing research process while the PSE team members would provide support and expertise as and when required.

## ***The process***

In May 2012, Queens University ran two practical training workshops for community practitioners on how to set up and run a traditional focus group. This workshop also considered issues such as research ethics, confidentiality, anonymising information and gaining informed consent.

To enable communities to apply a systematic approach to their research, the OU provided professional digital recording equipment and the first set of transcripts for each of the groups of their discussions, as a template for how to document their sessions. Over the following months, in response to requests from CFNI, the PSE team produced sample question sets linked to the PSE living Standards Survey, enabling community groups to compare their experiences with PSE findings at a later date.

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<sup>13</sup> Queens University is working on separate engagement projects with other groups in Northern Ireland who were interested in measuring poverty locally and have chosen to use survey tools such as a simplified necessities survey. Participants in the Communities in Action collaboration have also expressed an interest in these types of survey tools as the project has progressed. These will be provided as part of a community toolkit and suggestions of how to conduct research through anonymous submissions proposed.

<sup>14</sup> Matthews and Sunderland, 2013

Selection of participants from each marginalized community was entirely at the discretion of the community practitioners. The practitioners chose to establish one or two and, in one instance 3, small focus groups of between 5 and 8 members making the participants in this project between 60 and 80 at any given time. Participants include people on low income, insecure and part time work, people with disabilities, parents, young people and pensioners. Through the community worker, each group member was made aware of the nature of the project, and its role to document the impact of the cuts as part of a broader collaborative project.

Many have agreed to participate for the full duration of this three-year project allowing the possibility to gather longitudinal data in each community. Each community agreed to ask the same basic question sets to gather baseline data and to allow for some general comparison of findings between communities, although the process varied according to the skills, experience and approach of the facilitator. The facilitator has in most cases been the community worker with insider knowledge and status<sup>15</sup>.

At the end of the pilot phase (August 2013) 6 out of 8 groups had conducted two sets of 'community conversations' using a digital recorder and numbering systems. Academic data analysis has not been undertaken to date, but through group discussions and preliminary analysis of the transcripts by CFNI<sup>16</sup>, a number of common themes emerged. These were further refined in CiA group meetings.

Common themes identified by the communities include: debt and financial insecurity; the rising cost of living; fuel poverty and fear, stress and anxiety caused by life on low income. The recession alongside cutbacks in services, the rising cost of living and impending welfare reforms appears to be having a profound impact on individuals and families, across the generations:

*"My daddy is a pensioner and last year he bought me oil three times or I would have had no heat, plain and simple, and I still pay him that in bits and bobs, I just wouldn't have it, and he hasn't much, that's the best about it, so he's scrimping and saving to help his family", (Participant, Northern Ireland)*

The burden of increasing stress on people's psychological welfare has emerged as one of the projects key findings across all communities with stress, anxiety, depression and concerns about rising suicide rates featuring, directly or indirectly in community conversations. As one participant comments:

*"Some bills will not be paid one month and then interest on that. And that'll worry me and will affect my health. Where I will go straight down and I don't want to go rock bottom again, because I've been there".<sup>17</sup> (Participant, Belfast)*

Community conversations and regular focus group meetings has led to peer support and local level information gathered through focus group discussions has enabled community practitioners to provide a targeted local response. Groups are using their

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<sup>15</sup> In one or two sessions the CFNI CiA project worker was asked to facilitate the sessions

<sup>16</sup> See CFNI,CiA first focus group findings.

<sup>17</sup> DP p.7

CFNI funding to develop local responses such as the provision of mental health care support, budgeting advice and support and inter-generational cookery projects.

The combined resources provided by this collaboration to support these communities has proven an effective team.

Association with the PSE academic project also offered greater legitimacy to local concerns. Here the strength of digital media tools for evidence gathering and sharing comes to the fore.

Digital tools and platforms offer academics and stakeholders increasing opportunities to amplify marginalized voices, share knowledge, expand public discourse and debate and inform policy and practice.<sup>18</sup> The OU team leads the dissemination side of the PSE project drawing on its expertise in the use of online digital media as a powerful pedagogic tool. Media cases studies alongside a dedicated PSE project website created and managed by the OU, is one of the primary mechanisms to support public engagement in the PSE's academic research methods and findings<sup>19</sup>. The creation of 'short, multi media personal stories made for publication on the internet' has grown exponentially in recent years<sup>20</sup> and in the view of the OU Community Engagement Lead, could be adapted into a powerful tool for communities to share community evidence. A core aim of the second phase of the process therefore, was to empower communities to use media tools and focused digital storytelling to explore and share their findings. This entailed working with communities to co-design a media process (identifying themes, telling stories, making films) that would work in their local context.

The choice of what stories to tell and the choice of fora through which to disseminate this experiential evidence are equally important to ensure the findings have the capacity to impact on public opinion and on policy debates. Using digital tools presented a number of challenges however, for low-income communities both in terms of access and digital literacy.

In the UK people on low income, not surprisingly, are least likely to have access to digital technology. 48% of people without home access to the internet are in the lowest socio-economic groups (DE). Regionally, Northern Ireland had the lowest rate of home computers and internet users at 79% compared to the overall UK average of 86%<sup>21</sup>. For community participants in this collaboration, people's lack of digital access, technical skills and confidence was a potential barrier that would have to be overcome.

A scoping exercise was conducted with the community groups to identify access to digital tools and to clarify community concerns about using media. Various options for sharing experiential evidence through short film and photo projects were then proposed, using low cost equipment<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> ESRC, 2013; RCUK, 2013

<sup>19</sup> See [www.poverty.ac.uk](http://www.poverty.ac.uk) accessed June 7<sup>th</sup> 2013

<sup>20</sup> Meadows 2003; Vivienne and Burgess, 2012

<sup>21</sup> Ofcom, 2010, p. 48) ; ONS, 2013, p. 1,2

<sup>22</sup> Only 3 groups responded to the original scoping questions. One to one discussions were then held with practitioners at quarterly CiA meetings and feedback from the CFNI project workers added to this information to inform the project design. In a follow up CiA meeting in June 2012, the author presented a variety of options to the

Based on community feedback, a method and workflow was developed incorporating tools that were both suitable for use with minimal training and were relatively inexpensive.<sup>23</sup> Tablets – in this case the Ipad - were chosen as the primary tool for making short films, as they are relatively affordable for community groups, appealing and simple and intuitive to use. This portable film making kit is supported via a community group PC or laptop located at the community centre or meeting point.

Local participants were highly suspicious of 'digital media', which they saw as something used by journalists, with the messages it conveyed outside of their control. To address these concerns, a pilot project was proposed in which we would work collaboratively with one local community group and their focus group participants to develop a model for producing photo based digital stories, on their own terms. The Ardoyne community group, Grace Women's Development, in North Belfast, volunteered to host the pilot project.

A series of workshops were provided for the Ardoyne focus group, to analyse their findings and devise a media production process. Anonymity and confidentiality informed every stage of the process. The same numbering used in focus group discussion was maintained in all workshop discussions and in individual interviews on chosen themes. The process was framed through community conversations using group discussion and debate to identify core community themes and stories. Community produced photos (of key objects, items and places), anonymised voice over and on screen text emerged as the tools of choice to tell community stories.

Producing an engaging story, within these constraints, required creative ingenuity from all the participants. While initially cautious about the medium and the technical skills required, participants quickly became confident with using digital equipment, learning and supporting each other in the editing process, with light touch guidance.

The resulting film, 'Surviving on the edge' was presented at a CiA meeting and used to catalyse other community groups interested in using digital media. To date two more groups have made their own films and other groups have begun the process or undertaken photo projects. The short films produced by these communities have become a powerful tool for lobbying policy and decision makers and have empowered participants and community practitioners in the process.<sup>24</sup>

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groups on how to make anonymous films generating discussion and debate around the preferred methods (photo based films) and approaches.

<sup>23</sup> I pads, identified as one option following research and conversations with colleagues who had used this tool in a community context, were chosen for community media production. An initial workflow was developed with technical staff at the OU. To create a sustainable model, where communities could learn to make their own films, the author (also a media professional), then worked with communities to simplify this workflow and devise a process for communities to use themselves. Formats vary according to the needs of communities, but generally involve photo-based films with simple voice over and text.

<sup>24</sup> See the PSE Final report, "We are sitting with the big people now", Kent, November 2013

## Bringing it all together: a new model for 'local to national' research

In the current climate, the PSE survey and findings present a uniquely valuable opportunity for local community groups to link into UK wide information to augment and strengthen their own findings at local levels and to amplify their voices through this partnership at a national and international level<sup>25</sup>.

Digital platforms, in this case the PSE website, were employed as a tool for making connections between local experiences and national academic research, in a publicly accessible forum. This innovative approach brings together transcripts and quotes, photos and short films to combine local experiences with national statistics, searchable by location and by theme.

Text for these community webpages has been produced collaboratively with the groups with support from the CFNI project worker and the OU. Each webpage includes reflections from practitioners on impacts, what they have learned from their 'community conversations' and how they have used these findings to generate community responses.

The result is a series of webpages on the PSE website, introducing the collaboration, the CiA's key findings and issues affecting each local community. The webpages are extensible so that analysis and reports produced in the future can be added. The website provides a free resource for both academic researchers and other community groups. This information can also be used to contribute to a wider public debate.

### **Overall findings**

This pilot engagement project provided a number of insights on how to engage low-income communities in wide scale research during a period of unprecedented social welfare changes.

A three-step research process or methodology was developed, tested and refined in collaboration with CFNI and local communities to link local community action research to a wider traditional research project. Community research tools that proved effective in this pilot included: Focus Group discussions in the form of *Community conversations* linked to the PSEs research question sets and focused digital storytelling using simple media tools such as Ipads. It is worth noting that the process of producing text for digital dissemination on the PSE website, required extensive encouragement and support from the CFNI and OU project workers. One possible reason is that written and text based tools and approaches continue to present barriers for many low-income community participants and practitioners. Groups however have reported benefitting directly, through increased profile and external interest in their work following their online exposure. Practitioners also recognize the value of being linked to a wider academic project. How much use community groups will make of the website themselves, has yet to be demonstrated.

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<sup>25</sup> From the project note, Kelly & Kent, April 2013

From this pilot process, two elements can perhaps be considered crucial to making poverty research 'more meaningful' to low-income communities. The first is the choice of partners with different levels of outreach, skills, resources and experiences. Bringing together partners with expertise at multiple levels expands opportunities for making an impact with this knowledge in the public realm. In this case, the eight community groups are based in the heart of their local community and run by members of that community, providing first hand experience of life on low income.

CFNI works on a local and national level, coordinating this cross community project so that emerging knowledge is shared between all participants including the PSE, in quarterly meetings. CFNI's experience in lobbying and extensive networks, provide routes for communities to engage in public debates around welfare reform. Queens University PSE team provides expertise on poverty and social exclusion research in Northern Ireland and extensive links to community, academic and policy networks. The Open University PSE team provides an oversight of the PSE project and access to the PSE's regional and national findings via digital platforms. The OU team also provides expertise on engagement approaches and digital knowledge sharing for pedagogic, engagement and impact purposes.

At the end of the pilot phase (August 2013), collective outputs include presentations of findings using digital media locally via community events, regionally and nationally via a submission to Stormont and screenings for local politicians, MLA's and MEPs, and internationally via the PSE website and online sharing through digital platforms such as YouTube. Practical actions are also taking place at a community level to respond to issues that have emerged from local research through for example training in the area of debt, budgeting and welfare advice or mental health support services<sup>26</sup>.

The second element contributing to the effectiveness of this process has been the role of low-income communities in developing an effective research process. The collaborative approach has enabled us to work together to test tools and approaches and to use community feedback to refine and improve these tools, while addressing community concerns. This partnership has led to a genuine knowledge exchange between academics and community partners, building trust, community confidence and research capacities within these communities. This in turn has led to an empowering process that is potentially sustainable in the longer term.

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<sup>26</sup> See also 'We are sitting with the big people now'. Final report on pilot NI engagement project and impact (Kent, 2013) available at [www.poverty.ac.uk](http://www.poverty.ac.uk)

## Conclusion: making poverty research meaningful

Our project has focused on engaging socially excluded communities in poverty research. The resulting pilot engagement process offers one model for making research ‘meaningful’ to hard to reach communities<sup>27</sup> through a systematic approach to gathering, documenting, contextualising and disseminating local experiences in partnership with a national poverty research project. It has been a fortuitous, experimental and mutually enriching collaboration between an existing community action research program run by CFNI and the PSE project, as part of our public engagement remit.

Participatory action research (PAR) projects are notoriously time and resource consuming. Introducing new skills and approaches, gaining trust and building confidence with and between communities, NGOs and academics takes time, patience and commitment from all parties. This hybrid PAR/ national research project was no exception, requiring continuous negotiation and ongoing support from the dedicated CFNI project officer and the OU community engagement lead, as well as members of the Queens PSE team, to nurture and maintain momentum in the process. A key lesson, from an engagement perspective, has been the importance of having high expectations for the possibilities such projects contain. By being aspirational, this in turn is inspirational.

The outcomes –reports, quotes, photos and collective digital stories provide *experiential evidence* about life on low income are contextualised through links to the PSE’s wider academic research project. This project website provides a knowledge bank for communities and academics, which can be used to support local action, enhance public debate and inform policy and practice about these issues and the wider research. Practitioners, particularly those who went on to produce films, are experiencing the benefits on a local level.

As one practitioner states:

*“We know how people are coping now, it helped us find a baseline and gave us the opportunity to get up to date information from people through having the discussions. It tells the real story... The focus group participants also learned that they could have control over research and that it could help them improve their situations”, (Community Practitioner, Ardoyne, Belfast)*

At the end of the pilot period feedback was gathered from our partners at CFNI and community group practitioners. Preliminary findings suggest that while there are

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<sup>27</sup> While hard-to- reach in this paper refers to ‘low income communities, PSE Northern Ireland researcher, Grace Kelly (Queens University) notes that in researching poverty “hard to reach’ communities can also include the wealthy as there is a dearth of social research on this study population (Barnard et al., 2007)

varying levels of engagement, this has been an empowering process, kindling peer support locally and enabling collective community led responses within and across communities. Future research papers are planned to explore these findings further.

*NB: Feedback alongside project outcomes are included in a short impact report, "We are sitting with the big people now" (Kent 2013).*

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