Rethinking Poverty

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This chapter describes what people want from their society. It uses the first of the three questions that framed the Trust’s research: what is a good society without poverty?

The chapter starts by explaining why deciding what we want as a society matters. Next comes a brief description of the key findings from the research, followed by an explanation of the Trust’s approach and a description of the multiple methods used to reach conclusions. Finally, the chapter sets out what the Trust has learned from the various studies undertaken.

Why we should decide what we want

We need to decide what kind of society we want because, unless we know where we are going, we will almost certainly land somewhere else. In *Ill fares the land*, Tony Judt suggests that big normative questions have fallen off the agenda:

We no longer ask of a judicial ruling or a legislative act: is it good? Is it fair? Will it help bring about a better society or a better world? Those used to be *the* political questions, even
if they invited no easy answers. We must learn once again to pose them.¹

The idea of the good life is central to the way we construct meaning in our lives. What we believe in, how we act, and the institutions we build all contribute to who we are. The key text here is the famous 1977 essay by Berger and Neuhaus, which examined the importance of ‘mediating structures’ such as family, church, workplace and neighbourhood in enabling people to live good lives and to develop a healthy society.²

The importance of these mediating structures has declined over the past half-century and this appears to be symptomatic of a deeper shift. Society has moved from one predominantly concerned with production to one concerned with consumption, so that the present appears unrecognisable from the past. Zygmunt Bauman has described this as the process of moving from ‘solid modernity’ to ‘liquid modernity’. While in the past we saw ourselves as ‘pilgrims’ in search of deeper meaning in a stable world, we now see ourselves as ‘tourists’ in search of multiple but fleeting social experiences. It is now harder to construct a durable sense of ourselves; we tend to live a fast life in a kaleidoscope of relationships.³

This has created a crisis of meaning in our lives, and consumerism has filled the void. As Neal Lawson puts it in his 2009 book *All consuming*, ‘Shopping has been emotionally, culturally and socially grafted onto us’. He also says that for many it is an addiction that fails to satisfy us: ‘Turbo-consumerism is the heroin of human happiness.’⁴ An extreme form of such consumerism can be found in the ‘celebrity culture’ in which famous individuals transform their fame into product brands, which the public then consumes. In emulating celebrities, ordinary people use the ‘selfie’, posting their photos on social media to display the illusion that life is ‘all about me’. Such developments were foreseen 50 years ago by Guy Debord in his 1967 *Society of the spectacle* in which ‘authentic social life has been replaced with its representation’. Debord argues that the history of social life can be understood as ‘the decline of being into having, and having into merely appearing’. This
condition is the ‘historical moment at which the commodity completes its colonization of social life’.\textsuperscript{5}

The price is a soul sickness at the heart of our society which breeds deep insecurity and unhappiness for many, while violating the basis in nature on which our species depends.

Principles of a good society

The Trust’s aim is to articulate the principles of a good society. To do this, it has undertaken many different types of research to locate a small number of key ideas that find resonance across many different people. The goal is to produce five principles to compare with neoliberalism’s five principles (free markets, small state, low tax, individual liberty and big defence).

The Trust realises that this is a complex undertaking and simple answers can only be provisional. It has used theoretical research, empirical surveys, professional reports, focus groups and participatory research. While results are based on many perspectives, they emphasise the views of people who have experienced poverty.

The wording of the five principles has been hammered out in numerous ways during the research. The wording is not perfect but, as will be shown later, the ‘tyranny of perfection’ is an enemy of progress towards the society we want.

The five principles of a good society are:

1. We all have a decent basic standard of living.
2. So we are secure and free to choose how to lead our lives.
3. Developing our potential and flourishing materially and emotionally.
4. Participating, contributing and treating all with care and respect.
5. And building a fair and sustainable future for the next generations.

One underlying concept that links the five principles is the idea of ‘community’. Below are four quotations from different focus groups, each of which expresses this in a slightly different way:
‘A good society would be one in which everybody lived together in a harmonious community where everyone is treated fairly.’ (Focus group for benefit recipients)

‘I think a good community with people who are friendly and who pull together, and maybe have the same ideals and goals in life, is the basis for a good society.’ (Focus group for people on low incomes)

‘A good place to be in, a decent community.’ (Focus group for people on medium incomes)

‘I think that for there to be a good society, people should be working together to achieve a common goal and feel included in the process – having a sense of belonging and sharing.’ (Focus group for people on high incomes)

The five principles, set out very simply here, result from a long process. Later in the chapter both the empirical findings and the participatory research on which these principles are based will be described in more detail. Since the process of reaching them tells us as much about who we are and how we live as the principles themselves, a description of how they were arrived at now follows. Since the task is a normative one, the process is inevitably difficult. It involves overcoming many barriers, some of which lie in our own attitudes, behaviours and assumptions.

**Our habits of thought are barriers**

Although there is near-universal agreement that we need new ways to give meaning to our lives and the society that we live in, there are three commonly occurring patterns of thought that prevent us from finding them.
The first barrier is the idea that developing a new way of thinking about the world and the purpose of society is simply a matter of changing the words while keeping the substance. Bret Davidson points out that the prevailing narrative runs deep into our cultural patterns, and reframing it needs to address how people construct their reality. At the Trust workshop on communications mentioned in Chapter One, communications consultant Deborah Mattinson concluded: ‘You need to start where the public are at; don’t think you will get them to think the way you do about an issue.’

The second barrier to developing a solution is starting with the problem. This often relies on what George Lakoff has called ‘negative framing’. Statements that are phrased negatively – in terms of getting rid of a problem – commonly produce the opposite of what is intended because the mention of the subject focuses attention on it. Lakoff’s example is ‘don’t think of an elephant’. Robert Fritz’s work on creativity has shown that if we try to solve a problem, we often reinforce it, which is why dieting so often fails. Negative framing often attacks the symptoms rather than the causes of a problem. As seen in Chapter One, poverty is a symptom of economic mismanagement, unequal structures and inadequate state intervention. Rather than starting with the problem, we need to devise a system that delivers what we want. As Carl Rogers put it:

Another great challenge of our times … is to develop an approach that is focused on constructing the new, not repairing the old; that is designing a society in which problems will be less frequent, rather than putting poultices on those who have been crippled by social factors.

The third barrier is thinking that there is a technocratic solution which only academic research can find. If you establish a correlation between a problem such as poverty and a factor that appears to drive it, says this kind of argument, you can frame a policy to reduce its influence and thus solve, or at any rate greatly diminish, the problem. In the complex, non-linear world of social relationships, we cannot treat
problems in this way, because to identify a simple cause among many other contributory factors is well-nigh impossible. Recommendations from reports conducted by think tanks or universities rarely address such complexity.

**The moral imagination**

To make effective use of evidence, we need to employ an explicitly normative frame using what John Paul Lederach has called ‘the moral imagination’.\(^{11}\) This entails an inclusive process in which relevant people use divergent thinking to mould the society they have into the future they want.

Lederach notes that it requires creative processes that are more akin to art than to traditional processes of development. As the pursuit of professional excellence in society has emphasised the technology, techniques and skills of process management, he suggests, we have too often lost a sense of the art: ‘our approaches have become too cookie-cutter like, too reliant on what proper technique suggests as a frame of reference, and as a result our processes are too rigid and fragile’.\(^ {12}\)

The use of the moral imagination is in a sociological tradition that derives from C. Wright Mills and his book *The sociological imagination*, published in 1959.\(^ {13}\) Mills admonished his social science colleagues for becoming obsessed with narrow, discipline-based technical applications and esoteric language that obscures the point that the key task for sociologists is to connect social history and personal biography and to imagine better futures. Following Mills, Lederach defines the job of moral imagination as being: ‘To imagine responses and initiatives that, while rooted in the challenges of the real world are, by their nature, capable of rising above destructive patterns and giving birth to that which does not yet exist.’\(^ {14}\)

Lederach’s approach builds on a distinction between two types of thinking – ‘convergent’ and ‘divergent’ – deriving from the work of psychologist Liam Hudson.\(^ {15}\) In convergent thinking, the solution to a problem is found by bringing material from a variety of sources to bear on a problem, in such a way as to produce the ‘right’ answer. In
divergent thinking, the solution is found by radiating outwards from any given stimulus. There is no right answer but a new configuration of phenomena that did not exist before.

Such processes need to be both creative and inclusive. With some notable exceptions, the campaigns to end poverty in the UK are neither of these things. Much of the writing about poverty is dull, technocratic and exclusionary. The idea of creativity is a more fruitful starting point and is more likely to engage people. The starting point for a good society is in our moral imagination.

Theory of a good society

There is an extensive literature on how to understand a good society going back at least to the time of Plato and Aristotle. Some of the literature is considered in The society we want. A glimpse at it is sufficient to show a bewildering complexity of views. Even so, boiled down to essentials, there are two dominant and opposing traditions, centred on freedom and equality. Fernand Braudel observes that if it were possible to record the whole of European history on a computer and then search for the problem that comes up most often, it would be liberty – ‘or rather liberties’, for liberty is generally at odds with the liberties, or privileges, of particular groups. Where these are asserted successfully, they encroach on the liberty of all and inequality makes its appearance.

While this is of course an oversimplification, Mark Rosenmann’s excellent review of the ‘common public good’ shows that this bifurcation of thought stretches back into history and colours almost all writing about the good society. Mickelthwait and Wooldridge trace it through history, beginning with Thomas Hobbes and his search for a social contract to bring order to human affairs. They move on to the influence of John Stuart Mill and his pursuit of liberty through to Beatrice Webb and her quest for social security, finishing with Milton Friedman and his desire for freedom. Throughout the history of the past 400 years, it is possible to observe the conflicting dynamic between freedom and equality. While freedom has exercised a powerful pull
over the politics of the left since the 18th century, more recently it has come to be associated with parties on the centre-right, with their emphasis on the individual and rejection of state interference. The tension between the two forces is sharply exposed, for example, in the conflict between the philosophies of laissez-faire and planning in the last years of the 19th century. It is evident in the current polarisation of political views in Europe.

It is axiomatic that a good society cannot be a divided society. Division leads to groups insisting on their views more strongly since they see them as under threat – a ‘we are right’ syndrome, which diminishes the plurality of civil society and marginalises minority views. It also produces negative stereotyping of the ‘other’, which leads in turn to a polarisation of politics into extreme positions which simply entrench the divisions and create a gulf across which it is impossible to communicate – except by shouting. Finally, these developments lead to a collapse in trust, a growing sense of insecurity, and a consequent increase in the force of hate. All this was evident in 2016, first during the referendum on Britain’s membership of the European Union and then in the American presidential election.

There is nothing new in this downward spiral. Mark Mazower’s revisionist study of Europe in the 20th century shows how the break-up of the Holy Roman Empire unleashed two brands of hatred that are still with us: Islamophobia and antisemitism. He suggests that Les Trentes Glorieuses between 1945 and 1975 were a brief respite in European affairs and we are now reverting to normality. Whether or not we accept this view, it’s a reminder that seeing government provision of social welfare as a right has a relatively short history. Since we are living in that period of history, it’s difficult for us to see beyond it, easy to think that it will always be so. Mazower reminds us that the progress of history is as often cyclical as it is linear.

At the end of this brief foray into the theory of a good society, we can conclude that, while theory helps us to clarify the competing tendencies at the heart of European thought and their long-running effects on our societies, it is of little assistance in providing a compass for us to find our way. We do, however, learn that there are no easy
answers and everything is contested. At the same time, when we look more deeply, using an empirical lens, we can find much that is common between us regardless of the outward complexion of our political views. While there is plurality, there is also scope for compromise.

The method

The study used many methods to try and understand this. It took an evolutionary approach, using the results of one phase of work to frame the next so that the findings were built up on an iterative ‘create and adjust’ basis. First, the Trust commissioned a population survey of 2,000 people from YouGov to identify attitudes to a good society and poverty. Following this, 12 focus groups were held, drawn from various subgroups in the YouGov sample. The results were then analysed and key hypotheses identified, which were tested on a much larger sample of 10,000 people.

This study unearthed the key factors that people feel make up a good society and these were used as the basis for further research work. The research commissions were of two main types. First, several participatory research exercises were conducted in which groups affected by poverty were asked to develop their views of a good society without poverty and how this might be attained. The views of the different groups were drawn on to formulate the five principles for a good society. Second, professional organisations were commissioned to address themes arising from these population studies.

The second strand of research involved studies by think tanks and professional researchers. These included work on child poverty, transport, housing, security, welfare, planning, civil society and fairness commissions. Funded organisations were encouraged to arrange meetings with relevant individuals and organisations to disseminate and discuss the work. A key part of the programme has been to promote meetings of community activists, people from voluntary organisations, public sector workers, businesspeople and others to build a constituency to take the work forward. In all these activities, the Trust has been careful to remain above party politics. It has
supported the All Party Parliamentary Group on Poverty, which has been a useful way of encouraging conversations between civil society and parliamentarians of all kinds.

Although the Trust has tried to be as comprehensive and as creative as it could, while also getting to grips with as much of the relevant literature as possible, it would be the first to recognise the limitations of its approach. The goal is to set out a series of hypotheses that others can take on. The good society is as much in the making of it as in the finished product. As Neal Lawson put it in a report for the Trust:

The Good Society is one that we create, it cannot be something done to us. Hope comes from the insight that the way we make things and make things happen in the 21st Century allows the means and ends of a good society to be aligned. ‘You can’t go around building a better world for people. Only people can build a better world for people. Otherwise it’s just a cage’, wrote Terry Pratchett in *Witches Abroad*. Nowhere is this truer than the ending of poverty, a process that now can and must involve the poor being their own agents of change.  

**What was learned from empirical surveys**

The empirical results demonstrate the importance of plurality. The fact that the study is dealing with a normative question about a good society means that there can be different opinions. Such variation is not a problem so long as compromise is seen as a source of strength not weakness; it is a central feature of a good society.

When it comes to a good society, the word that matters most is ‘fairness’. Trust-sponsored surveys asked 10,112 adults over the age of 16 to say ‘which one of the following phrases best describes what you would like Britain to be?’ Answer options were:

- an ‘everyone for themselves’ society;
- a ‘fair’ society;
A majority (60.9 per cent) opted for a ‘fair’ society. The next most popular option was an ‘equal’ society (20.7 per cent). The other options were much less popular (7.0 per cent for ‘UK PLC’, 2.0 per cent for an ‘everyone for themselves’ society and the remaining 8.4 per cent ‘don’t know’).

Early pilot studies and focus groups identified 17 qualities that people said were important for a good society. These were tested in the population survey from two angles: their importance and their presence. First, people were asked ‘how important, if at all, do you think each of the qualities are for a “good society”? Answer options were: ‘very important’, ‘fairly important’, ‘not very important’, ‘not important at all’ and ‘don’t know’. Second, people were asked ‘how present, if at all, do you think that each of the following is in Britain today?’ Answer options were: ‘very present’, ‘fairly present’, ‘not very present’, ‘not present at all’ and ‘don’t know’.

Figure 3.1 shows the percentages who said that each quality was ‘very important’ or ‘fairly important’ for a good society and the percentages who said that it was ‘very present’ or ‘fairly present’.

It is noteworthy that all items score 74 per cent or above when it comes to importance, reflecting the fact that the items chosen had been identified as important in earlier stages of the research. What is striking is the variation between the different items and their rank order: eight of the nine items that score 90 per cent or above measure social qualities, such as security, safety and independence, rather than economic ones. The highest economic indicator, well-paid work, is ranked sixth, while prosperity comes twelfth. For most people, the good life is not about having a lot of money; it is about having enough to pay their way and occasionally enjoy a few luxuries. Both having well-paid work and the absence of poverty are important, largely because they help people to live fuller lives. There was a general
Figure 3.1: Qualities of a good society that people believe to be (a) important and (b) present, among 10,112 respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quality</th>
<th>Very or fairly important (%)</th>
<th>Very or fairly present (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fairness</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A fair chance for all</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Security</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Well-paid work</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tolerance</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compassion</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absence of poverty</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choice</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equality</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having a level playing field</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prosperity</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independence</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-reliance</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social mobility</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solidarity</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welfare benefits</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

sense from the focus groups that material possessions matter less than community:

‘I think a good society should place much less emphasis on material things. Is it a coincidence that since people have had more stuff and money “community spirit” is perceived to have reduced?’

‘There is too much greed in the world and while we allow that, we will never make progress.’

At the same time, people want a balanced life:

‘A good society should provide the opportunity to do well in life, realise ambitions, provide opportunities for work and ensure that everyone has a stake in society.’

We need to have a basic standard of living and to sort out the economic stuff first, and that puts people in a position to make a trusting, equal community.

Although some people see the idea of community as utopian, most people feel that Britain is at its best when we are ‘together’ in a venture such as the Olympics. As one focus group respondent put it: “When the crowd cheered on Mo Farah in the 10,000 metres as he won the gold, I thought ‘yes, we really are in this together’.” Such a community is not a static place; it is continually evolving through new communities such as social media, though it relies heavily on face-to-face contact. A retired focus group participant said: “I go to a day centre and we spend a lot of time talking and doing things together. It really lifts my spirits.”

Many participants – particularly those in the discussion groups for new migrants and Asian people – talked at length about a desire for more cohesive communities. In the migrant group ‘cohesion’ means, in part, physical security and freedom from being victims of hate crime.
However, participants also talked at length about a sense of belonging and acceptance that comes from shared cultural and moral values. For some this means protecting the traditions of ‘their’ community; for others it means reaching out to others. An Asian participant noted: “The community centre is a great place where you can meet new people … I’ve learnt a lot about myself and different cultures being here.” However, some communities feel under attack and this can make them less willing to open up to other communities. A member of a black focus group noted:

‘I’m not sure young people today have the same opportunities to “learn” about different heritages. We do “Black History Month” and we think that’s ok to show that little bit of heritage to other communities. But I think a few years ago we were more willing to talk to other people. We’ve lost that a bit.’

The idea of community, which grounds people’s identity, is underpinned by four key qualities: safety, tolerance, fairness and equality. Although people mean different things when they talk about these qualities, they form the basis for their place in the world, giving them the opportunity to develop and thrive.

There is widespread agreement that a good society should not have poverty in it. In focus group discussions, most agreed that there is no need for anyone to live in absolute poverty in a good society. A typical comment was: “I think if there are people in society living in poverty it is not a good one.” However, in some groups people stressed that, as one participant put it, “It is inevitable that some people are going to be poorer than others”. The issue of relative poverty divides people and many people believe that a society can still be a good one even if there is relative poverty. A participant spoke for many when she said: “Poverty is unlikely to be eliminated as someone will always be poorer than someone else but in a good society there should be a minimum standard of life and perhaps much less gap between the richest and poorest.”
Analysis of the characteristics of survey respondents and their answers to questions allowed the identification of key groups in society based on their attitudes towards a good society and the role of poverty. A hierarchical cluster analysis found six groups, which were labelled based on their characteristics as ‘idealists’, ‘libertarians’, ‘conservatives’, ‘realists’, ‘stoics’ and ‘disengaged’.

**Idealists**

‘Idealists’ are the group who are most moved by poverty and wish to do something about it. Idealists typically read *The Guardian*, vote Labour or Liberal Democrat, and are more prevalent in Scotland than other parts of the UK. They see the value of the welfare state and access to services. They are concerned about the consequences of social inequality and wish to improve the environment. They value tolerance and social mobility. For idealists, government action on poverty should mean that people in poverty live a life as close to normal as possible.

Idealists are more likely than other groups to see a gap between their views and the state of Britain. But they are optimistic that intervention could see improvements on issues such as education, hunger and mental health. They see government, employers and businesses as having an important role in this, while families have little role to play. Idealists form an estimated 12 per cent of the population.

**Libertarians**

For ‘libertarians’, the key quality is self-reliance. Poverty is the result of people’s bad choices, and individuals and families are responsible for their own poverty. Libertarians typically vote Conservative; they are concerned about immigration and feel that it will increase poverty. There are, however, more important priorities than poverty, which typically ranks towards the bottom of what is important for them.

Libertarians feel that many people are over-dependent on the NHS and that welfare benefits should be linked to contributions. They agree that government should help people in poverty but only to stop them...
starving. Families, not the state, should have the main responsibility to help people who fall into poverty. For libertarians, Britain is a compassionate place but poverty is inevitable. They form 19 per cent of the population.

Idealists and libertarians are at the extremes of opinion when it comes to the issue of a good society without poverty. While idealists stress structure, libertarians stress individual agency. All other groups – 69 per cent of the population – fall between these two extremes. Being generally more moderate, they have fewer stand-out characteristics.

**Conservatives**

‘Conservatives’ are particularly concerned with ‘fairness’ and having a level playing field. They typically see choice and well-paid work as the keys to a good society. They are more likely than other groups to say that Britain is fair and secure and offers well-paid work, so they tend to be more content with the current condition of society.

Conservatives are likely to read the *Financial Times* or *The Times*. They are likely to say that other issues are more important than poverty and inequality, and that unemployed people should look harder for work because poverty is often due to people’s choices. They would like to see less of a ‘free handout culture’ in Britain and tend to feel that some people are over-dependent on the NHS. Conservatives are the most prevalent group, forming 23 per cent of the population.

**Realists**

‘Realists’ are likely to read the *Daily Mirror* or the *Daily Record*. They typically see themselves as poorer than average and tend to be in classes D and E. They are most likely to vote Labour or UKIP and see structural causes for poverty. While most people see buying a second-hand car as ‘normal’, realists see this as a luxury. Realists worry that immigration is increasing poverty. They form 18 per cent of the population.
Stoics

‘Stoics’ see poverty and associated conditions as an inevitable part of a modern society. Despite that, they support the living wage. They feel that reducing the cost of living and providing affordable housing would ameliorate the worst effects of poverty.

Stoics tend to be characterised by the lack of strong opinions, though the idea of tolerance is very important to them. They feel that knowing people is the way to get on. They form 17 per cent of the population.

Disengaged

The final group is labelled ‘disengaged’. They typically answer survey questions ‘don’t know’. They are prevalent among the 18–24 age group. They are more likely to live in London, be unemployed or a student, and read the Sun or Star newspapers. They are sceptical about schools being able to do much to reduce poverty. They form 10 per cent of the population.

This analysis shows that a strategy to develop a good society without poverty must take account of a wide variety of perspectives. There are also questions that are difficult to deal with. The surveys and focus groups uncovered the negativity and tensions that are at work in our society. Respondents who believe that people are responsible for their own poverty are, for example, particularly apt to criticise those on benefits. When people of this opinion come together for a discussion, they encourage each other, and the tone of the conversation tends to deteriorate into a process of blame. What follows is part of a dialogue among a focus group of people selected because they share the view that poverty is caused by people’s bad choices:

Paul (aged 36, head of retail): ‘People find themselves in bad situations through bad choices. Why should society pay for it?’

Lewis (aged 55, communications worker): ‘They don’t choose to be in need but they make bad choices then find themselves there.’
Mary (aged 75, living alone): ‘Many disabled people work, they are not all looking for handouts.’

Johnny (aged 41, local government officer): ‘If someone is fit to work, then they should have no choice but to be made to look for work.’

Mary: ‘And it is our role in society – a good society – to help those who are in need the most, not those who choose to be in need.’

Paul: ‘I don’t believe that a perfectly healthy person in their 30s or 40s can be in need of support.’

Allan (retired army officer): ‘How about forcing the feckless to take the burger-flipping job but top them up to a living wage rather than give them the dosh free?’

The research found that people with views like these tend to display feelings of insecurity and vulnerability in their own lives. Indeed, the more insecure a person feels inside, the more likely they are to project their negative emotions onto others, stereotyping them and scapegoating them for all the ills of society. The findings fit well with Anna Freud’s ‘mechanisms of ego defence’, in which people use unconscious processes to transfer their anxieties onto others to maintain their emotional homeostasis. Such a process is more prevalent among people who suffer what psychiatrist R.D. Laing called ‘ontological insecurity’. Migrants, minorities and people on benefits tend to become scapegoats for people who lack, to quote Laing, ‘a centrally firm sense of one’s own and other people’s reality and identity’ which arises from the experience of one’s ‘presence in the world as a real, alive, whole, and … [temporally] continuous person’. The importance of a sense of security is a key finding from our research.

Participatory research

Survey research, focus groups and consultations with civil society groups can take understanding only so far. The methods used so far cast people as ‘respondents’ or ‘interviewees’, implying that they
have little control over the shape and control of the research. These are essentially ‘supply-side’ approaches to the issue of poverty. The Trust decided it needed to address the ‘demand side’ by providing an opportunity for individuals on low incomes to develop and express their own ideas. This involved research with rather than on individuals and is an important corrective to the tendency in the poverty lobby for professionals to speak for people in poverty, a practice that further marginalises people who are already marginalised. As part of the focus group research, people on benefits sometimes complained that it is patronising for political activists to use their adverse circumstances to campaign for the political changes that they want to see.

The method used was participatory research. This approach has a long pedigree, pioneered in the Global South during the 1970s by Rajesh Tandon and brought to the attention of the West by practitioners such as Robert Chambers and John Gaventa. Though the approach is less well practised in the UK, the Trust could assemble for its work a good team of practitioners including Ghiyas Somra, Ruth Patrick and Dan Farley, Sara Bryson and Rys Farthing as well as Michael Orton.

In participatory research, people use their skills, knowledge and experience to devise their own framework, develop the questions and produce solutions. As Bennett and Roberts put it:

Participatory approaches to research and inquiry into poverty recognise the particular expertise of people with experiences of poverty to put forward their own realities – and their right to do so – and can also make research more effective and improve its impact on policy.

In allowing deeper conversations over a longer period, the method reveals the complexity of issues, drawing on subjective and emotional experience and enabling highly nuanced conclusions. The process is often chaotic, but it’s free from the logic of theory, the division of ideology or the neat categories of social research. Rather than forcing ‘either/or’ answers to questions, it allows ‘both/and’ feelings to emerge.
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Binary opposites drive people to conclusions that do not fit well with their feelings. People want freedom and security, collective approaches and individual ones. The participatory research suggests that a good society is based on conjunctions rather than disjunctions.

The open-ended nature of participatory research means that it is difficult to manage and requires a high level of facilitation skills. A critical part of the process is to build the confidence among participants so they believe they can engage in big ideas, and produce clear and concise results – using John Paul Lederach’s view of the ‘moral imagination’, outlined above.

An ethos for working together was developed, based on seven key points:

• emphasising what we agree on (not points of disagreement);
• seeing cooperation and compromise as strengths (not weaknesses);
• being positive and focused (not just criticising, looking at negatives, discussing problems and being a talking shop);
• stepping outside organisational boundaries and seeing working together as a vital starting point not an optional afterthought;
• accepting a ‘good enough’ outcome (not insisting on individual ideological perfection);
• being curious about different views, listening and ensuring everyone has their say;
• acting with care, compassion and respect for each other.

Given that each group could choose its own topics and approaches, there was no guarantee that useful comparisons could be made between different groups. However, there was an impressive consistency in the themes and perspectives, which suggests a high degree of agreement about what people want. What follow are the main findings from four separate participatory exercises.
Children’s voices

The work featured here was undertaken by children and young people. Over a three-year period the Trust supported several interlinked projects, including a conference in the North East of England, the production of a play by children, a photography project and an online game, together with a series of residential meetings in which children could develop and record their thoughts.27

The work culminated in a document called Poverty ends now.28 Thirty-eight young people, drawn from five of the poorest wards in different cities in England, contributed to writing this based on the work of a wider group of 180 young people between 2012 and 2014. Children and young people did all the work. Though adults were on hand to offer guidance, they were careful not to control decisions. The name ‘Poverty Ends Now’ (PEN) was chosen because the young people felt that it was commanding, short, and catchy for social media purposes and because the PEN acronym matched what they were doing – writing.

To implement their findings, the children planned three national actions: a launch of their manifesto in parliament, tabling parliamentary questions and writing an evidence submission, and undertaking a national media campaign. The All Party Parliamentary Group on Poverty provided a forum for the national work. The children also planned six local actions based on the six themes that emerged as central to young people’s concerns: decent incomes in Liverpool, affordable housing in London, equality at school in the North East, healthy food in Gateshead, feeling safe in Manchester, and public transport in Newcastle.

The final manifesto was clear and succinct. It was based on six principles:

1. A minimum standard of living, not just surviving, for every family in Britain.
2. An equal schools experience for all.
3. Affordable, decent homes for everyone.
4. Access to three affordable, healthy meals a day for every young person.
5. A feeling of safety within their communities and at home for everyone.
6. Affordable transport for all young people everywhere.

These principles were derived from the life experiences of the young people. Unlike many people who write about poverty, the young people ‘tell it straight’ based on their own authentic experience. In the box are excerpts from children’s descriptions of what it’s like to live on a low income in their neighbourhoods.

**Children’s descriptions of what it’s like to live on a low income**

**On food banks:** ‘It’s povie. It’s poverty. Like proper poverty ridden. Do you know what I mean? But at the end of the day, beggars can’t be choosing. If you need the stuff, you need the stuff. You got to provide for your family, and that’s the only way you can do it. You have to swallow your pride and deal with it.’

**On housing:** ‘It’s crap. Why do you think I go to the (youth club) coughing and sneezing at the same time?’

**On personal hygiene:** ‘You don’t know how bad it is having nits. People are like “there’s things moving in your hair”, and you’re like “Ummm … flies, they’re flies”.’

**On neighbourhoods:** ‘How would you like to live in an area that’s considered to be a dump?’

**On the authorities:** ‘The worst thing about living in poverty is the way it gives others permission to treat you as if you don’t matter.’

Deliberations leading to the manifesto reveal that children see things differently from adults. Their perception is more direct and concrete – focusing on immediate things like the lack of food in the fridge, the inability to go on school trips, or the embarrassment of bringing
friends home to a flat with rising damp. Things that have little place in the poverty debate among adults, such as love from parents or caring for pets, are very important to children. Children lack the theoretical baggage that adults tend to carry, avoiding quibbles about issues such as the best definition of poverty. They also feel that whatever is wrong should be fixed now. The title of their manifesto, *Poverty ends now*, speaks to an immediacy that is rarely present in the policy debates of adults. As one of the children said: “It’s the job of adults to fix things, and I don’t understand why they talk about things but never seem to do them.”

The difference in frameworks between adults and children produced one of the most valuable outcomes from the project. As one of the professional workers who facilitated the work of the young people commented in a project report: ‘The strongest outcome was the democratic challenge the project posed those working in the “poverty” sector, locally and nationally and implicitly and explicitly.’ In her report, she cited an event in Manchester:29

You could see the decision makers present (from police commissioners to councillors to voluntary sector people) slowly coming around to the realisation that these young people were ‘key stakeholders’ (their words) in decisions they’d be making for a while now, and that their views were incredibly important.

All the local projects were successful in raising awareness about the value of young people’s views. To take some examples, in Liverpool young people developed a play called *Brass Razoo*, which was performed to a full house in November 2014. Trade unions saw the potential of using the play to promote discussion of the issues and gave the group financial support to enable a second performance at a 1,000-person capacity theatre. In Manchester, the police commissioner began to work with the group of young people on issues ranging from sexual exploitation to park lighting. In the North East the group met every two weeks to discuss poverty and education. On the advice of their local MP the group conducted a questionnaire in their own schools
and colleges to gather evidence about the impact of poverty in schools. They spoke to over 1,000 local young people, analysed the findings and organised a local evidence session with 60 regional decision makers. The group has now been offered funding by the North-East Child Poverty Commission to continue meeting over the next year to act as a shadow youth board of the commission as well as continuing their work on the manifesto priorities.

All local events engaged local councillors, MPs, teachers and others. They all attracted local press coverage. That young people used exciting ways of engaging people, such as plays and real-life examples, as opposed to traditional reports, helped to attract attention.

Nationally, the work raised awareness of the issues, though there is less evidence of lasting outcomes. Poverty ends now was launched on 15 October 2014 at the Houses of Parliament. Young people presented the report to a large audience of other young people and some MPs and peers, and engaged in a formal questioning of three MPs, one from each of the three main political parties. Although the event was highly successful and had a positive effect on the confidence of the young people, there was no sense that any further action would be taken. There is a risk that much effort can go into supporting events and actions of this kind, but that messages, while listened to at the time, have little effect on policy or practice. This raises the vexed question of participation and power: people may be able to take part in political processes, but it does not follow that they have any power to change things.

**Black and minority ethnic voices**

The second participatory research project was conducted by BRAP, a charity that works on equalities. A total of 42 people took part in five working groups, each from a different cultural background – Asian, Black, multiple heritage, recent arrivals and White British.

A central finding from this work is that fulfilling interpersonal relationships are fundamental to people’s wellbeing and sense of
happiness. This is partly because relationships give people a sense of security:

‘I would look after my mum first, because she’s always been there for me when I’ve needed her … I know she always will be – whatever happens, at school or college – I know she’ll love me and my brothers and sisters.’ (Group of young people)

‘As you get older you realise that having someone who cares about you is more important than all the things that you got hung up about before – the cars and the big house.’ (Mixed race group)

Closely connected to being loved, many participants discussed the importance of being respected and the impact this has on people’s self-esteem:

‘Respect, for me, is one of the most important things. Respect for yourself, because a lot of people don’t respect themselves, but when you respect yourself you’ll respect other people.’ (Mixed race group)

Participants felt that respect is central in a good society and its absence causes damage. This is invariably wrapped up in discussions about racism:

‘Stereotypes are really damaging. I have been pulled over by police for running, like in my running gear with my brother, and asked what I was doing. It was stupid because it is like, “how are you going to ask me what I am doing if I am running and you can clearly see that?” It’s obvious they just see you as “a black man”.’ (Black group)

‘It annoys me how based on ethnicity you are called different things even if you are doing the same thing, say for instance holding a knife: for black people you are violent criminals, for
Muslims it is dangerous terrorists and for white people they are misunderstood, or just playing a game. It’s obvious who they think is part of society and who isn’t.’ (Black group)

Each group quickly reached the conclusion that we do not live in a fair society – one in which everyone has access to the same opportunities as everyone else without fear of discrimination. The society that they want is based on five principles:

1. ‘We won’t judge you because of who you are.’ A good society will take active steps to ensure people aren’t discriminated against in public life (education, employment, health, the criminal justice system, and so on). Discrimination can take many forms and can be on many grounds, including class. Simply obeying equality laws isn’t enough: we need to change the way society privileges some sections of itself.

2. ‘Your problems are our problems.’ Life is hard for a lot of people. They’re not academic, didn’t get much out of school, and are now finding it difficult to get a job. Perhaps they’re stuck living at home. Perhaps they have health problems and have no one to talk to. A good society shows compassion. It can’t help everyone and it won’t solve people’s problems for them. But it will say, ‘you’re worth investing in’. Because it recognises that people aren’t stupid, or too lazy to get a job, or just need to go out and make some friends. It recognises that people are part of a system whose rules they didn’t create.

3. ‘We’ll make work worthwhile.’ People value work. It provides independence and a sense of self-reliance. Productive work gives people a feeling of accomplishment. As such, work should provide people with the resources to ensure they can afford the basics in life and take part in the opportunities a fair society offers.

4. ‘We’ll help you find a place where you feel accepted.’ A good society will ensure people can access other people with similar interests, concerns and values. This is partly about ensuring such opportunities are available – that there are places, programmes and
events people can go to. And it’s partly about ensuring people aren’t restricted in accessing these things because their horizons are too narrow or because there are cultural or societal pressures preventing them from doing so.

5. ‘We’re happy if you fulfil your dreams – whatever they might be.’ The only measure of success is whether people reach the goals they set themselves. A good society will certainly stretch people if they don’t think they’re able to achieve all they’re capable of. But it won’t push particular narratives or agendas. It won’t reward only monetary success. It won’t idolise only the wealthy. It won’t portray society as a competition.

Organised groups of poor people

The third example is participatory work with three groups of people living in poverty – Dole Animators in Leeds, Thrive in Teesside and ATD Fourth World in London – facilitated by Ruth Patrick and Dan Farley. This group was different from the others in that it produced pictures of its work with the assistance of Dan Farley.

Pictures for two of the groups are shown in Figures 3.2 and 3.3. It is striking that both display a remarkable similarity to the five concepts developed by Michael Orton in Secure and free, though at no time did the workshops mention this project. This suggests that the agreement over key solutions was completely organic and that there is much scope for building consensus.

What people want from their society is modest, as reflected in the picture from Thrive in Teesside. They are not seeking flashy cars, expensive phones or fashionable clothes. People mostly want to escape the daily struggle of trying to make ends meet and to be comfortable. This is about trying to escape a state of ‘constant worry’ and becoming ‘free from care’. Dole Animators participants drew themselves in the state that they felt they were in now and how they would like to imagine themselves. One woman depicted herself as someone with ‘out of bed hair’, ‘clothes four years out of date’ and ‘scuffed Primark
shoes’. She imagined how she might be if she was not struggling, with ‘salon hair’, ‘nice clothes’ and ‘new shoes’.

Figure 3.2: Thrive’s five-point plan to address poverty and insecurity

Source: Figure 3.2 was produced by participants at participatory workshops facilitated by Dan Farley and Ruth Patrick during 2016.
ATD Fourth World participants took a different approach. After detailed discussions, they decided that they would rather highlight one solution only, and build their image around this. The solution that felt most pertinent to them was the creation of a climate in which

Figure 3.3: Leeds-based Dole Animators’ vision for a better, more secure future

Source: Figure 3.3 was produced by participants at participatory workshops facilitated by Dan Farley and Ruth Patrick during 2016.
the voices and expertise of those living in poverty are listened to, and better incorporated into public and political debate. In other words, the ‘recognition’, ‘respect’ and ‘voice’ which are commonly highlighted in the literature on poverty and social citizenship.  

Grassroots groups

The fourth participatory exercise consisted of nine two-hour sessions over a nine-month period with grassroots groups in the West Midlands. Organised by Michael Orton, each session had a facilitator and used interactive methods such as World Café, deliberative decision making, ‘groan zone’ and time for quiet reflection.

Sessions covered: first thoughts about content, criteria against which to judge ideas, identifying key themes, agreeing draft wording for each principle, reflecting on the process, consulting on emerging drafts, making revisions and agreeing examples of first steps. This exercise produced enormous amounts of data and identified more than 500 key words. This shows the complexity of the issues and illustrates the need for multivariate approaches to building a good society. At the same time, the complexity can paralyse action, and the volume of differing views means that it is hard to make progress. Given that the goal is simplicity, there need to be criteria for reducing the complexity to produce five principles. In whittling down the number of key actions, a voting procedure was used, as shown in Table 3.1.
The groups finally agreed that the principles had to be positive, clear, concise, realistic, believable, tangible and durable, while being inclusive, motivating and inspiring so that they could act as a rallying point.

The principles to emerge were:
1. **Enabling potential**: Everyone has an equal opportunity to develop their full individual potential.

2. **Equal society**: Everyone is included and our basic human needs are provided for.

3. **Participatory democracy**: Everyone’s voice is heard and every vote counts equally.

4. **Environmental sustainability**: Everyone feels our local environment is our home, and the planet is preserved for our children and grandchildren.

5. **An economy for the common good**: Everyone’s needs are supported through regulated and responsible markets with mixed ownership models and by fostering local economies.

**Drawing the threads together**

Each of the four participatory research exercises developed a slightly different framework to summarise the results and any way of synthesising them involves compromise. However, this is an important point of principle from the participatory research: all the groups see compromise as a strength not a weakness. As the grassroots groups in the West Midlands concluded: “Building unity means being willing to listen, compromise and accept good enough outcomes.”

That said, analysis of the work suggests almost total agreement on the importance of a good society that fulfils people’s basic needs and enables them to feel safe. A good society means that people feel that they belong – that they are accepted, that relationships matter and that they are based on care, respect and fairness. A good society means that people take part in the decisions that affect them and have a voice in how things are run. A good society encourages creativity and fulfilment.

Michael Orton, who oversaw much of the participatory research described here and had access to the materials from the rest, drafted the five principles of a good society set out at the beginning of this chapter and road-tested them with various other groups. The criteria for selection were the same as those developed by the grassroots groups.
The five principles of a good society are not hard and fast; they are to be developed, modified and applied by people who want to take this forward.

This chapter shows that process is as important as product in constructing a good society. This is because such a society is not based on survey results or the theory of some dead economist or political scientist but is a lived experience constructed every day by society’s members. Feelings matter and the acid test of a society is whether it is deemed good by the people who live in it. Engaging people over time and using creative methods to develop ideas enables complexity to emerge and compromises to be made so that competing views can be accommodated. Through this hard-won process, we can produce the society we want. How to do this? This is the question to be addressed in the next chapter.

Notes

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27  Available from: www.children-ne.org.uk
30  See www.brap.org.uk/the-name-game