A politics of recognition and respect: Involving people with experience of poverty in decision-making that affects their lives.[i]

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Introduction

People living in poverty and their organisations should be empowered by involving them fully in the setting of targets, and in the design, implementation, monitoring and assessment of national strategies and programmes for poverty eradication and community-based development, and ensuring that such programmes reflect their priorities.

Five years ago, over 100 countries signed up to this statement in the Copenhagen Declaration and Programme of Action at the UN World Summit for Social Development. In the UK, the Summit provided the catalyst for the establishment of the UK Coalition against Poverty (UKCAP), which now has around 160 members. Its mission was the inclusion of people with direct experience of poverty in partnership with local, national and international organisations, working towards ending poverty and campaigning for the national anti-poverty programme to which governments signed up at the Summit.

Towards this end, the Coalition raised money for the *Voices for Change* project, a key element of which was the establishment of an independent Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power, of which I was a member. The second section of this chapter describes the work of this Commission, together with a number of other initiatives in the UK, which reflect the spirit of the Copenhagen Declaration. It considers the position of the UK Government and points to lessons to be learnt from the experience of the southern hemisphere.

The first section of the paper attempts to put such practical initiatives in a theoretical context. Using the concepts of exclusion, citizenship, democracy, recognition and empowerment, it makes a normative case for the involvement of people in poverty in decision-making that affects their lives. It argues that such involvement should be seen as a central element in a 'politics of empowerment and inclusion'.

I. Theoretical Perspectives

The politics of poverty is increasingly being couched in a non-materialist discourse of human and citizenship rights, democracy, inclusion and respect.[ii] This does not represent a denial of the material conditions that lie at the heart of poverty. What it does do is offer an opportunity to transform the politics of poverty into one that addresses questions of power as well as material resources. At the same time, it integrates the concerns of those in poverty into wider debates about citizenship and democracy, rather than treating them as separate (Lister, 2004). This section represents an initial attempt to develop an analytical framework in which this emergent politics of

poverty can be both understood and forged. It does so through the application of a number of, at times overlapping, concepts in social and political theory.

Social exclusion
Social exclusion has become an increasingly fashionable concept in many parts of Europe, including New Labour's Britain. Graham Room has suggested that, whereas the notion of poverty primarily concerns the distribution of material resources, that of social exclusion focuses 'primarily on relational issues, in other words, inadequate social participation, lack of social integration and lack of power' (Room, 1995: 5).[iii] The last element points to the political as well as social nature of exclusion.

In the same volume, Jos Berghman identifies as helpful the breadth and dynamic nature of the notion of social exclusion. Breadth, in his exposition, refers to failure in a number of different systems of integration: economic (through the labour market), welfare, interpersonal (through family/community) and civic (through the democratic and legal systems). This approach, he suggests, points to the conceptualisation of social exclusion as 'the denial – or non-realisation – of citizenship rights', following the European Observatory on Policies to Combat Social Exclusion (Berghman, 1995: 19). Such a conceptualisation also calls attention to another aspect of social exclusion's multi-dimensional nature, not addressed by Berghman. This is the ways in which prejudice and discriminatory and oppressive behaviour can, within these four systems, serve to exclude particular groups such as women, racialised groups, disabled people and gays and lesbians.

The dynamic nature of social exclusion encourages a focus on processes and not just outcomes (Wilson, 1995; Byrne, 1999). In doing so, it provides due regard to agency, as well as structure, one or other of which can be lost sight of when attention is fixed, either benevolently or critically, on individual experience and behaviour. Thus, by encouraging the question 'who is excluding whom and how?' the concept draws attention to the role played by social and economic institutions and by political decisions in creating and reinforcing poverty and exclusion. A more dynamic approach also opens up space for the agency of those excluded as political and social actors, rather than treating them as simply passive victims. It places greater emphasis on the political dimension of exclusion, which in turn raises questions about the political status and role of excluded groups (Lister, 2000).

Such a conceptualisation of social exclusion is representative of what Ruth Levitas has dubbed RED, a redistributive, egalitarian discourse. As she notes, 'from the perspective of RED, political inclusion is an aspect of social inclusion' (Levitas, 1998: 173). However, such a discourse is less prominent in contemporary British and EU politics than those of SID (social integrationist), which focuses mainly on the labour market, and, to a lesser extent, MUD (moral 'underclass'). The growing demands to involve people in poverty in decision-making that affects their lives represents a challenge to a narrow conceptualisation of social exclusion, limited to labour market participation, and to a derogatory conceptualisation, which labels people in poverty as passive welfare 'dependants'.

Citizenship
In contrast, such demands draw implicitly on RED, which, alongside its egalitarian stance, simultaneously represents an expansive discourse of *citizenship*, embracing civil, political, cultural and social rights. Citizenship is, in part, about equality of status and respect (relevant also to

recognition politics, see below). As Beresford et al argue, in a study in which 'poor people speak for themselves', their inclusion in poverty discussions

> is part of the broader issue of addressing the restricted citizenship of people who are poor. It also signifies respect for poor people; an acknowledgement that they have something to offer, that their contribution is important, worthwhile and valued, and recognition of their expertise in their own experience. Much of the social democratic/social administration debate about poverty has focused on equality. Supporting people to speak for themselves is a basic requirement for such equality (Beresford *et al*, 1999: 27).

In some strands of contemporary citizenship theory, participation in decision-making is put forward as a citizenship right. Thomas Janoski, for instance, makes the case for 'a right of participation', suggesting that its addition to the panoply of rights 'pushes citizenship rights into the center of more recent welfare state controversies and democratic struggles' (1998: 50). The right to participation can be understood as a bridge between the two main traditions of citizenship: the (social) liberal rights and civic republican traditions, which respectively cast citizenship as a status and a practice. In the latter, the essence of citizenship is active participation in governance and politics for the good of the wider community

The right to participation has also been promoted as a human and not just a citizenship right. Carol Gould (1988), for instance, has argued for an extension of the human right of democratic participation to include the right of participation in social and economic decision-making. Her argument is grounded in the agency of human beings and in the principle of freedom as self-development. It resonates in the distinction made by Doyal and Gough, in their theory of human need, between simple autonomy as expressed through agency and 'the higher degrees of critical autonomy which are entailed by democratic participation in the political process at whatever level' (Doyal and Gough, 1991: 68).

In some cases, citizenship and human rights discourses are combined to make the case for the involvement of people in poverty in decisions which affect their lives.   In a recent consultation document the British Department for International Development argues that human rights 'provide a means of empowering all people to make decisions about their own lives rather than being the passive objects of choices made on their behalf'. The document 'sets out the practical ways in which the human rights framework contributes to the achievement of the objective of enabling all people to be active citizens with rights, expectations and responsibilities' (DfID, 2000: 1).

A concrete example is provided by ATD Fourth World, in its description of a project in which severely disadvantaged families were able to meet with each other and with professionals in a spirit of partnership. The underlying philosophy of the project was that the creation of a democracy, in which 'all citizens have the means to enjoy their rights, assume their responsibilities, and make their contribution', requires us all to 'be ready to change and to consider the poor as partners with whom we will learn how to respect the human rights of each and every one of us' (1996: 61).

ATD claims that 'the project showed us that as people gained self-esteem, self-confidence, and sometimes practical skills as well, they started to see that their views and opinions could be taken seriously' (1996: 58). As a result, they were able to participate more effectively in partnership relationships with professionals. The importance of such a process to citizenship is underlined in some feminist writings on citizenship. Susan James, for instance, has argued that to speak in one's own voice and put forward one's views in the polity, as required of citizens, requires 'self-esteem –

a stable sense of one's own separate identity and a confidence that one is worthy to participate in political life' (1992: 60).

The ATD project is an example of how the very process of participation helps to build self-esteem and thus strengthen the agency of people in poverty, thereby enabling them to act more effectively as citizens. As Maud Eduards (1994: 18) has observed, agency embodies 'a transformative' capacity, which has been vital in the development of women's citizenship. It is particularly vital in the development of the citizenship of women in poverty, but also men in poverty. As I have argued elsewhere 'to act as a citizen requires first a sense of agency, the belief that one *can* act; acting as a citizen, especially collectively, in turn fosters that sense of agency' (Lister, 2003: 39). Indeed, agency has been described as 'the defining quality of citizenship' as a practice (Barnes, 1999b: 82).

Another example comes from a unique parliamentary initiative in which an All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) of Members of Parliament has involved, on a regular basis, people with experience of poverty in its meetings. In the first report of the APPG on Poverty, participants were quoted as saying:
>'It is good for me to be able to speak out'
>'Taking part in the APPG has helped me to learn what I can do to make differences, to know what I can contribute'.
>'We don't make the effort if we don't think that we'll be listened to, participating in an APPG on Poverty has given me encouragement and it is something that I will take back to my community to encourage them too' (APPG on Poverty, 1999: 4).

The report observes that for most of the participants 'the experience of being listened to and taken seriously is unusual….The APPG on Poverty extends democracy beyond the reach of the already powerful and allows the experts to speak for themselves, and often to significant effect'. It also suggests that 'the humanisation of the democratic process is important for real participation and respectful exchanges to take place' (*ibid.*). Dialogues such as these represent the promotion of citizenship through greater democratic accountability (Cornwall and Gaventa, 2000).

Democracy
The invocation of principles of *democracy* addresses two concerns: the growing exclusion and separation of those in poverty from the democratic process and a dissatisfaction in some quarters with the practice of representative democracy. It also chimes with some of the rhetoric of the 'third way'.

One of the most prominent critics of the political marginalisation of those in poverty has been J.K. Galbraith. In the US context, he has written of how the contented majority 'rule under the rich cloak of democracy, a democracy in which the less fortunate do not participate' (1992: 15), and that in the face of inequality of 'power and influence, democracy has become an imperfect thing' (1996: 138). In his vision of 'the good society voice and influence cannot be confined to one part of the population'. The solution, he suggests, 'is more active political participation by a coalition of the concerned and the poor' (1996: 141).

Galbraith is here concerned with electoral politics. His argument is that the non-participation of people in poverty at the ballot box means that their interests and concerns are increasingly ignored by the political parties. The same phenomenon, albeit to a lesser extent, is increasingly true of Britain. Under the British 'first past the post' electoral system, voters in safe seats, which include

many of the poorest areas, can safely be ignored. Electoral politics are increasingly played out in a small number of marginal seats. Electoral turn-out in the deprived inner city areas is generally lower than average.

This is one of the arguments used in favour of electoral reform to achieve proportional representation. But the political exclusion of those in poverty also raises questions about the very nature of modern democracy. Political theorists, such as Carol Gould, have argued for the democratisation of all the institutions of society – social, economic and cultural as well as political. Gould propounds the following principle of democracy: 'every person who engages in a common activity with others has an equal right to participate in making decisions concerning such activity. This right to participate applies not only to the domain of politics but to social and economic activities as well' (Gould, 1988: 84; see also Pateman, 1970).

More recently, in his exposition of the third way, Anthony Giddens has argued for the 'democratization of democracy'. He contends that 'the crisis of democracy comes from its not being democratic enough' in the face of 'the demand for individual autonomy and the emergence of a more reflexive citizenry' (1998: 71). One policy implication, he suggests, is '"experiments with democratization" such as the use of electronic referenda, revived forms of direct democracy and citizens' juries' (Giddens, 2000: 62). Echoing Giddens, Tony Blair has written of the third way's 'democratic impulse' which 'needs to be strengthened by finding new ways to enable citizens to share in decision-making that affects them' (1998: 15). Initiatives to 'listen to' women and to older people, a 'race relations forum', a 'people's panel' to elicit views on public services, as well as citizens juries are among the devices introduced to promote this goal.

A study of two citizens' juries describes them as 'just one example of the new approaches to democratic practice which are being developed throughout the public sector' and 'as a practical expression of the notion of discursive or deliberative democracy' (Barnes, 1999a: 1). The increased emphasis on more participatory democratic mechanisms is, though, raising questions about the relationship between participatory and representative democracy, especially at local government level. Some in local government have resisted more participatory forms of democracy on the grounds that they undermine representative democracy. Others have responded that 'an active conception of representative democracy can be reinforced by participatory democracy' (Clarke and Stewart, 1998: 3).

Principles of deliberative and participatory democracy are one element in the case made for 'radical democracy' (Mouffe, 1992; Trend, 1996). The other key principle is that of radical pluralism. Central to the notion of deliberative democracy is the provision of public space in which the voices of different groups can be heard and can deliberate. Iris Young, for instance, tempers her advocacy of participatory democracy with the warning that 'only if oppressed groups are able to express their interests and experience in the public on an equal basis with other groups can group domination through formally equal processes of participation be avoided' (1990: 95). She thus asserts the principle that 'a democratic public should provide mechanisms for the effective recognition and representation of the distinct voices and perspectives of those of its constituent groups that are oppressed or disadvantaged' (1990: 184).

Nancy Fraser likewise defines radical democracy in terms of opposition to 'two very different kinds of impediments to democratic participation', namely social inequality and 'the misrecognition of

difference. Radical democracy, on this interpretation is the view that democracy today requires both social equality and multicultural recognition' (1996: 198).

Recognition
Fraser is here talking about the *recognition* and misrecognition of difference. However, the demand for recognition is becoming more vocal in the politics of poverty also, as that politics is increasingly expressed as a politics of 'voice' (Yeatman, 1994; Williams, 1999). In her original *New Left Review* article on the politics of redistribution and of recognition, Fraser (1995/1997) roots the former in the struggle against socio-economic injustice and the latter in the struggle against cultural or symbolic injustice. Poverty is quintessentially the product of socio-economic injustice and anti-poverty campaigns are central to any politics of redistribution. At the same time, though, these campaigns increasingly deploy a discourse of recognition as well as of redistribution. Among the examples of cultural or symbolic injustice cited by Fraser are 'nonrecognition (being rendered invisible via the authoritative representational, communicative, and interpretative practices of one's culture); and disrespect (being routinely maligned or disparaged in stereotypic public cultural representations and/or in everyday life interactions)' (Fraser, 1995, p71/1997a,p14).

In an earlier essay, Charles Taylor identified recognition as a vital human need and underlined the links between recognition and identity:

> our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the *mis*recognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression (Taylor, 1992: 26 & 25; see also Fraser, 2000).

Nonrecognition, misrecognition and disrespect are the typical experience of those in poverty, especially when labelled pejoratively as an 'underclass' or as inhabiting a 'dependency culture' (for a critique, see Lister, 1996). At a National Poverty Hearing in London, organised by Church Action on Poverty (an ecumenical anti-poverty group), one of the most common refrains among those with experience of poverty was the desire to be treated with greater respect. 'I just wish people would give us a chance and treat us with some respect' and 'I just feel very angry sometimes that people are ignorant to the fact that we are humans as well and we do need to be respected' were typical of the comments made (Russell, 1996: 7 & 10). David Donnison has suggested that the demand for respect and 'to be treated as the equal of anyone else' is indicative of an emergent new paradigm in social policy (2000: 25; see also Donnison, 1998). In an international context, the *Human Development Report 2000* identifies 'a life of respect and value' as a key aim of human development (UNDP, 2000: 2). The report also emphasises the interrelationship between civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights.

As Fraser acknowledges, economic and cultural forms of injustice tend 'to reinforce each other dialectically' so that 'economic disadvantage impedes equal participation in the making of culture, in public spheres, and in everyday life' (Fraser, 1995: 72-3/1997: 15). In her critique of Fraser, Iris Young places greater emphasis on the interrelationship between the two forms of injustice and politics. She maintains that 'we should show how recognition is a means to, or an element in, economic and political equality and that 'so long as the cultural denigration of groups produces or reinforces structural economic oppressions, the two struggles are continuous' (Young, 1997: 156 & 159). Drawing on Fraser's own work on a 'politics of needs interpretation', she argues for a

'materialist culturalist approach [which] understands that needs are contextualised in political struggle over who gets to define whose needs for what purpose' (Young, 1997: 155).

In a more recent contribution to *New Left Review,* Fraser herself pays more attention to the interrelationship between the economic and cultural and develops her argument in ways that are potentially more directly applicable to the politics of poverty. She suggests that 'properly conceived, struggles for recognition can aid the redistribution of power and wealth and can promote interaction and cooperation across gulfs of difference' (2000: 109). The theoretical move that she makes is to treat misrecognition as a question of social status subordination and injustice, rather than of identity:

> From this perspective, what requires recognition is not group-specific identity but the status of individual group members as full partners in social interaction…It means a politics aimed at overcoming subordination by establishing the misrecognized party as a full member of society capable of participating on a par with the rest (2000: 113; see also 2001).

The obstacles to 'participatory parity' on this model are not just cultural but lie also in the maldistribution of resources. Although Fraser herself does not make the link, such an approach is highly relevant to the politics of poverty. Here a politics of recognition is not about the assertion of group difference, as in the case of women, racialised groups, lesbians and gays, and disabled people (remembering that we are not, of course, talking about discrete groups). Indeed a successful politics of redistribution could remove the category altogether, as 'the poor' are a group who are primarily the product of the maldistribution of resources. A politics of recognition in this context is, instead, about the assertion of recognition in the sense of equality of status and respect, which, as stated above, are critical to the recognition of the full citizenship of those in poverty.

As Diana Coole has observed, discourses of difference have tended to marginalise social class. While elaborating the difficulties in applying such discourses to class, including the 'underclass', she asserts that respect for those at the bottom of the economic hierarchy is 'patronizing' (Coole, 1996: 22). Coole makes the valid point that 'poverty robs groups of the economic and cultural capital needed for participation' (1996: 20). However, she appears to treat this as a given rather than asking how, alongside the struggle to eliminate poverty itself, the cultural and political capital of those in poverty can be strengthened and fostered so as to enable participation. Indeed, as observed earlier, the evidence suggests that the very process of participation and of being treated with respect can itself nourish agency and the ability to participate.

Bob Holman, editor of a book in which seven people in poverty write their own stories, argues that 'the reluctance to listen to the bottom 30 per cent devalues them. They are treated as specimens to be examined and displayed, not as human beings with the rights *and capacities* to participate in public debate' (Holman, 1998: 16 my emphasis). Similarly, ATD Fourth World rejects the construction of people living in poverty as 'objects of other people's knowledge, not as authors of their own development – as problems' for 'they have something to offer, something to contribute' (1999: 16). What is at issue here is the value accorded to poor people's own interpretation of their needs and demands and recognition of and respect for the expertise born of experience (Beresford and Croft, 1995).[iv] Moraene Roberts, another participant in the National Poverty Hearing, argued:

> No-one asks our views. We are the real experts of our own hopes and aspirations. Service providers should ask the users before deciding on policies, before setting targets that will affect our lives. We can contribute if you are prepared to give up a little power to allow us

to participate as partners in our own future, and in the future of our country (Russell, 1996: 4).

Empowerment

Roberts points to a crucial element in the equation: that of *power*. As Levitas observes, theories of dialogic and deliberative democracy tend to underplay the importance of 'the structures of power' within which dialogue and deliberation take place' (Levitas, 1998: 176). Beresford and Croft suggest that 'in one sense, it is poor people's powerlessness which lies at the heart of their exclusion from the poverty debate and helps to explain it' (1995: 79). If this powerlessness is not addressed, general strategies to promote participatory democracy could exacerbate rather than redress imbalances of power (Bur, Stevens and Young, 1999: 14).

The 1997 United Nations Human Development Report identifies 'the political empowerment of poor people' as an essential element in 'a political strategy for poverty': 'Poor people should be politically empowered to organize for themselves for collective action and to influence the circumstances and decisions affecting their lives. For their interests to be advanced, they must be visible on the political map' (UNDP, 1997: 94 & 10).

Similarly, drawing on the work of Paulo Freire, David Byrne looks to the collective 'empowerment of the dispossessed' as part of 'a popular democratic politics of solidarity' necessary to combat social exclusion (1999: 133). The process of empowerment concerns two aspects of power. One is what Giddens (1991) calls 'generative' power, which is about 'self-actualisation' and which is 'related to energy, capacity and potential' (Hartsock. 1985: 210). It is this kind of power which is developed through the community development process of 'capacity-building' and which can be witnessed in the very process of participation, as confidence and self-esteem grow. However, feminists have also warned against reducing empowerment to an individual social-psychological process, thereby losing sight of the importance of collective empowerment to achieve social change and to alter the distribution of power. Virginia Rinaldo Seitz thus defines empowerment as 'both a process and an outcome of collective identity and political praxis, resulting in a capacity in thought and action to address the condition and position of marginalization' (1998: 234). Integrating the two, individual empowerment enables people to come together to work for change (Mayo, 1994).

This brings us to the other aspect of power identified by Giddens as 'hierarchical', which describes the ability of a group or individual to exert their will over others. Writing in the *Human Development Report 1997*, Else Øyen warns that poverty can serve the interests of the economically powerful, so that the redistribution of resources (political as well as economic and social) involved in poverty reduction 'will sometimes be vigorously opposed' (UNDP, 1997: 95). Thus, ultimately, individual empowerment of a generative kind will need to lead to some redistribution of hierarchical power, if people in poverty are to achieve genuine empowerment through participation. Moreover, individual empowerment may create or exacerbate divisions among groups in poverty, if some are 'empowered' at the expense of others (Taylor *et al*., 2000).

II. Participatory Initiatives

The first part of this chapter has argued the case for the involvement of people in poverty in decision-making that affects their lives, with reference to the theoretical concepts of social exclusion, citizenship, democracy, recognition and empowerment. The normative ideal for which it has argued stands in contrast to the reality. As a participatory study with people in poverty in Britain observed ' one key group has been conspicuous by its absence so far in poverty discussion

and policy development – people with experience of poverty themselves' (Beresford et al, 1999). Britain has a strong 'poverty lobby', comprised mainly of middle class professionals, which speaks out effectively on behalf of those in poverty. It emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, in part because of the collective weakness of people in poverty as a political constituency able to influence governments.

However, increasingly, following the example of the disabled people's movement, demands are emerging for the voices of those in poverty to be heard directly rather than just be filtered through the professional 'poverty lobby'. A number of initiatives and projects have acted as prefigurative models of what is possible.[v] The paper describes three of them, focusing in particular on the *Voices for Change* project initiated by the UK Coalition on Poverty.

ATD Fourth World
The longest standing is ATD Fourth World (All Together in Dignity), which operates in a number of countries. It works in partnership with 'the Fourth World' (i.e. people who 'due to their poverty, are unable to make their voices heard or to maximise their potential') 'to develop their potential abilities and to enable them to participate fully in the life of their communities' (ATD, 2000: 56). An important aspect of this work is the facilitation of the involvement of people in poverty in an 'exchange of ideas and views with representatives of community services and policy-makers – at local, national and European level' (*ibid.*: 57).

A recent report describes ATD's 'Public Debate Project'. This aimed to promote the involvement and voice of people in long-term poverty in public debate and the valuing by others of their contribution. A total of 70 people were involved in the project, including around 20 core participants. The project was 'designed to build up the participants' confidence and to enable them to speak to a wider audience, when they were ready' (ATD 2000: 11). At its core was a series of policy forums. These provided a space for the sharing of ideas and skills and for the exploration of policy issues arising from their experiences. More intensive residential training seminars were also held. These helped participants to 'move forward from just speaking about their own lives to learning from their experiences and relating them to how society is run, both locally and nationally' (*ibid.*: 13-14). Together, these then provided the basis for participation in a series of policy forums with Ministers and civil servants, as well as in the meetings of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Poverty, referred to earlier. The overall conclusion reached was that:

> the project demonstrates that people in poverty have ideas regarding policy improvement and are actively seeking to share this experience. In order for this to be possible, however, the policy-making process must evolve and mechanisms must be created that allow for knowledge and expertise from people at grass-roots level to be taken on board (*ibid.*: 6).

Church Action on Poverty
Church Action on Poverty (CAP) is an ecumenical group, which established in 1994 a 'Local People, National Voice' project. Among the aims were: to provide opportunities for people with direct experience of poverty 'to speak out for themselves' and to 'create an effective dialogue between policy makers, church members and people experiencing poverty'.

The project consisted of a series of local events and hearings, which provided a platform from which people with experience of poverty could speak out about their experiences and views. Over 20 local and regional hearings, each attended by 100 to 200 people, were held. They culminated in a national poverty hearing in March 1996. This provided an opportunity for national policy-makers,

church, business and voluntary sector leaders and others to listen to people with experience of poverty not only give witness to their experiences but also talk about their ideas about what should be done and the initiatives in which they were involved. As part of the project, CAP established a small policy group, comprised mainly of people with experience of poverty. This produced a short report in which the group set out its analysis of poverty and policy ideas (Bennett, 1996).

UK Coalition against Poverty
Both ATD and CAP were founder members of what was to become the UK Coalition against Poverty, which now has over 160 member organisations. The Coalition was originally established to advance the aims of the UN International Year for the Eradication of Poverty in the UK. From the outset, the Coalition was committed to the involvement of people with the experience of poverty in all its activities and decision-making processes. As well as establishing the APPG on Poverty, it organised, in 1996, a national participation event at which people with experience of poverty were able to exchange experiences, knowledge and ideas. The report of the meeting acknowledged that those involved 'were among the more confident and active of the people who suffer from poverty'. Nevertheless, 'there was a wealth of diverse experiences to share and debate'. The workshop provided 'a model of participation' and, as such, was 'a wonderfully empowering and motivating experience for all who attended' (UKCAP, 1997: 2).

As a result, those attending felt strongly that it should not just be a one-off event but should lead to a more sustained initiative to promote participation in decision-making. The outcome was the birth of the Voices for Change project, funded by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust. Over a two year period, the project worked from the local level, building up to area meetings and a UK wide meeting, through a network of area and national steering groups. Much of the local work involved 'capacity building' and training as well as investigation into participation and the barriers to it. It used the technique of 'participatory appraisal (PA)', one of a family of participatory methods developed in the southern hemisphere, which has been borrowed as a community development tool to work with disadvantaged communities in the industrialised world.[vi] The technique relies heavily on pictorial, non-linear methods, which allow people to share experiences and develop and express their ideas in a non-threatening environment. It involves marginalised people as active participants from the outset and in some cases they are now training others in the techniques and using them in their local communities. As part of Voices for Change, local groups received training in PA techniques and then used them to conduct their own consultations, which fed into area meetings and into what was initially called the Commission of Inquiry into Poverty and Social Exclusion.

The Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power
The participatory origins of the Commission were one of its features that made it unusual, if not unique. Furthermore, the intention was that area steering groups should continue to be involved in the work of the Commission through Commissioners' visits and in the final stages when they would have the opportunity to discuss and give views on the drafting of the final report. The difficulties in fulfilling this objective underline the difficulties of sustained participation.

The other unusual feature was the Commission's composition: a mixture of 'people in public life' and 'grassroots' people with experience of poverty. This meant developing ways of working which are not typical of committees and Commissions. Meetings were often difficult, as people from very different backgrounds had to learn to work together. It was often impossible to keep to agendas, which did not provide the space for 'grassroots' Commissioners to express themselves in the ways that they wanted or to deal with issues arising in their lives, such as one Commissioner's problems

with the local social security office threatening her benefit because of her absence at Commission meetings. In the early stages, 'public life' Commissioners were sometimes challenged as to what they knew about poverty, a sobering experience for those normally treated as 'experts'. Ensuring the full and equal participation of all members was a problem, which was not simply reflective of differing backgrounds. As in all committees, some members (both 'grassroots' and 'public life' and both women and men) were more forceful and talkative than others, but this became more of an issue given the nature of the exercise and the need to balance and respect different kinds of expertise (del Tufo and Gaster, 2002). .

Yet, for all the difficulties, there was always an incredible energy in what were pretty long meetings and much was achieved. The Commission's Report described it as 'an extraordinary journey for Commissioners and for the staff supporting their work' (Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power, 2000: v). The formal Evaluation Report, commissioned by the funding body, observed that

> the experiential nature of this *extraordinary process* (commissioner), the informality, laughter, passion, real honesty and energy were major features that distinguish this from other commissions. This was no ordinary set of meetings but a series of dynamic, unpredictable and often exhausting encounters, with a constant tension between seeking good processes and achieving intended outcomes (del Tufo and Gaster, 2002: 6, emphasis in original).

Referring back to ATD's observation, cited above, this kind of process 'requires us all to be ready to change' (ATD, 1996: 61). Even for a feminist such as myself, it involved a different way of 'being' on a committee, a way of being which meant that I had to engage as a 'whole person', emotions and all, and not hide behind a bureaucratic committee persona. Yet, one of the most profound lessons I learned was that, even so, I was not engaging at the level of the 'grassroots' Commissioners who had to commit so much more to the project and for whom so much more was at stake. As one woman Commissioner said 'we've sold a lot of our souls some of us sitting round this table – it better be worth it'. If it is not 'worth it', the costs for 'public life' Commissioners will be relatively small, whereas they will be massive for 'grassroots' Commissioners, both personally and because of the expectations of people in the communities in which they are based. Thus, the boundaries between 'public' and 'private', between 'political' and 'personal' have been much more porous for 'grassroots' than 'public life' commissioners.

The Commission started work at the end of November, 1999. One of its first actions was to change its name to the Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power, so as better to reflect what were seen as the key issues. In addition to reviewing the evidence collected through the Voices for Change project and from other available sources, Commissioners visited local projects in all countries of the UK. It quickly became clear that 'participation' was in danger of becoming a dirty word for people with experience of 'token' or 'window-dressing' participation or of superficial consultation exercises, limited to impenetrable questionnaires and/or from which they had seen no positive outcomes or even feedback. Anger was expressed at politicians who attended meetings, made speeches and then left before hearing what people had to say and at officials who simply did not listen. Many felt exploited rather than empowered by what went for participation. Nevertheless, the demand for genuine participation was strong among some groups, despite the many barriers they faced.

These barriers, as identified by the Voices for Change project, are multiple and inter-connected. Some derive from poverty itself such as the struggle for day-to-day survival, which can sap people's

energy and health; the inability to meet the financial costs that can be involved; lacking suitable clothes; feelings of stigma. These overlap with personal barriers such as lack of self-esteem and self-confidence, which may derive in part from limited educational opportunities. Additional barriers can be faced by some groups such as young people, disabled people, travellers, Asian women, asylum-seekers.

More institutional barriers include lacking 'the tools of the trade' that professionals take for granted such as faxes, computers and internet access; the operation of social security rules that inhibit involvement for fear of affecting benefit entitlement; officials who either resist participation or who engage in it in ways which are exclusionary rather than inclusive. What particularly angers people is the use of jargonistic language, which is experienced as exclusionary.

In addition to barriers to participation, there are problems that can arise for which there is no easy solution. These reflect some of the more theoretical points made in the first part of the paper. Examples are: how to engage the most marginalised people and ensure that minority views are heard and not drowned out by the loudest voices; and how to deal with arguments that, unless people have been elected, they are not 'representative' of people in poverty or have no right to speak on behalf of others. One Commission member suggested that instead of 'representatives' we should think of 'connectors' i.e. people who help to connect marginalised groups to decision-makers and vice versa.

The Commission reported in December 2000 (Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power, 2000). The Evaluation suggests that 'the report was generally seen as offering different insights in a different tone – it speaks from the heart and "touches" people, avoids "policy speak", and tries to overcome the deep mistrust felt by people on the receiving end of policies' (del Tufo and Gaster, 2002: 7). As well as specific recommendations, the report puts forward a set of 'principles of participation'. Among these are:
- a recognition of 'participation in the decision-making process of people with experience of living in poverty…as a basic human right';
- a willingness among all those involved 'to change how we think and act to make participation genuine and effective';
- a readiness among people who hold power to 'learn to listen properly to the voices of people living in poverty, to understand, to communicate in ways that everyone can understand, to respect people's contributions, and to act on their voices' (Commission on Poverty, Participation and Power, 2000: 45).

The Government's position
The final stages of the Commission's work involved a number of meetings with Ministers and officials in Government Departments to gauge their reactions to the Commission's findings and line of argument and further meetings were held following publication of the report. There is no single Government position, with some parts of Government more open than others to the Commission's message. New Labour has accepted and promotes the message of participation at local neighbourhood level. In a Foreword to a consultation document on a National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal, Tony Blair acknowledged that 'unless the community is fully engaged in shaping and delivering regeneration, even the best plans on paper will fail to deliver in practice' (Social Exclusion Unit, 2000: 5). The Social Exclusion Unit, who drew up the strategy, attempted to consult people affected by its proposals, although the speed with which it had to work made it difficult to do so effectively.[vii] Members of the Unit were very responsive to the Commission's

message, having become increasingly convinced of the case for participation as a result of their experience. Increasingly, a degree of community involvement is required in the plethora of neighbourhood and community initiatives that the Government is promoting.

The case for participation has also been accepted in a development context. A consultation document from the Department for International Development states that 'a human rights perspective on participation means moving beyond and above local-level processes of consultation through to ensuring poor people's participation in broader formal and informal systems of decision-making' (DfID, 2000: 19). What is significant about this statement is not simply the strong endorsement of participation but its explicit acceptance that it should not be confined to the local level.

The Government has, though, been rather slower to accept the case for involvement in decisions taken at national level in the domestic context. Yet, this is the level at which some of the most important decisions affecting people in poverty are taken. Until very recently, Ministers appeared to consider it sufficient to engage in general consultation exercises on their anti-poverty and welfare reform strategies, which usually involve the publication of a document (and summary leaflets) and possibly meetings with key professional voluntary sector organisations, without any attempt specifically to engage with people in poverty. Questions about representativeness and fears about creating bureaucratic structures have typically been raised. There was little or no acknowledgement that the particular expertise of those with experience of poverty could inform and thereby improve policy-making. However, in response to pressure, including from the EU, which requires participation in the drafting of National Action Plans on Social Inclusion (NAPSincl), the Department for Work and Pensions is consulting on how to involve people with experience of poverty in drawing up future UK NAPSincl. It also included some workshops with adults and children with experience of poverty in a consultation exercise on the measurement of child poverty. Elsewhere in government a Community Forum, half of whose members are people from local communities, has been established to advise on neighbourhood renewal policies. Thus, we are seeing gradual progress.

The same cannot be said with regard to the related issue of service user-involvement. There has not yet been acceptance of this principle in the sphere of benefits even though it is now reasonably well established in welfare services. A Green Paper on welfare (social security) reform highlighted 'the rise of the demanding, sceptical, citizen-consumer' (DSS, 1998: 16), but did not discuss how the principles of user-involvement, developed elsewhere in the welfare system, might be applied to social security. Yet a review conducted for the Government had concluded that 'user involvement is a viable option for social security', and although challenging, 'it offers a number of benefits' (Stafford, 1997: iii).

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to chart, both theoretically and empirically, an approach to anti-poverty action, which is part and parcel of the democratic process and both an expression and recognition of the citizenship of those experiencing poverty. Although the paper's focus has been on the process rather than the substance and outcomes of anti-poverty action, the latter, of course, must not be forgotten. Ultimately, at issue are not just the promotion of genuine *participation,* but also the eradication of *poverty* and the redistribution of *power*.

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[i] A shorter version of this chapter was originally published in *Social Policy and Society* 1(1), 2002. Elsewhere, Fiona Williams (2000) has also used the notion of 'recognition and respect', in her case with regard to a set of principles in welfare.

[ii] See for instance a consultation document from the UK Department for International Development on *Human Rights for Poor People* (DfID, 2000); a report by the European Institute of Social Services, *Include us In, Participation for Social Inclusion in Europe* (Bur, Stevens and Young, 1999); the *Human Development Report 2000* (UNDP, 2000) and a series of documents from ATD Fourth World, including the most recent, *Participation Works, Involving people in poverty in policy-making*, (ATD, 2000)

[iii] In fact, the distinction between the concepts of poverty and social exclusion is not that clear cut but social exclusion does encourage a more relational perspective on poverty (Lister, 2004).

[iv] Iris Young's recent work (Chapter 1 in this volume and 2000), in which she argues the importance of the presence of a range of standpoints, perspectives and experiences, in particular those of excluded groups, to good judgment in policy-making, is also relevant here. See in addition Lister and Beresford (2000) for an exploration of the implications of this approach for research into poverty.

[v] For further details see Beresford et al (2000), ATD (2000).

[vi] This is just one example of how much we can learn about participation from the South. Another was provided by Hilary Wainwright in an article about participatory local government budget decisions in Brazil (*The Guardian,* 21 June 2000).

[vii] The Social Exclusion Unit was set up by Blair, at the heart of Government, soon after coming to power. Its remit is to develop 'joined up' solutions to intractable problems of social exclusion.