

Beyond 2015: Shaping the future of equality, human rights and social justice (12 and 13 February 2015)

Session 7: Maximising the impact. What are the next steps in bridging research and policy agendas?

Response by Helen Barnard, Joseph Rowntree Foundation

The questions we were asked to talk about are ‘What are the challenges we face in addressing inequality?’ and ‘How do we address them in the current climate?’. I think the first big challenge around this area is competing for air time, which is always a challenge, but over the last few years there has been a particular dimension to it, relating to the narrative in the media and elsewhere about the recession and austerity and about what I think at one point was called the squeezed middle. I don't think we use that phrase any more, but it is the sense that people in the middle of society have been experiencing a squeeze on living standards and that has been the big story throughout the recession and through a lot of the austerity period and all the reports from the Institute for Fiscal Studies and others saying it is the poorest who suffer most don't change that. In that context, getting people to listen to what people have to say about groups who are suffering disproportionately is incredibly hard when the mainstream of society feel they are suffering. So that is the first challenge that we face now which is probably different to some periods in the past.

The second thing is about demonstrating impact. For several years – and this is set to continue – the question asked has been ‘How do we save money?’. It is not ‘Where can we spend money to achieve greater equality or other outcomes?’ it is ‘What can be cut?’, ‘What should be saved?’ And what we are seeing is that quite a lot of sectors have really struggled to demonstrate the concrete impact that safeguards their funding. For instance, people I know in the youth services sector have been decimated, because they found it difficult to get evidence which would be accepted broadly that youth work has an impact. Everyone involved believes that this is the case, but if you sit in front of a Select Committee and you can't come up with anything for them to grab hold of, then it is really hard to win. I think that is true across a lot of sectors –

with a lot of the things that people instinctively feel to be valuable, it is hard to demonstrate that is the case.

The third challenge is about decentralisation, localism and devolution. That is obviously the path we have been travelling for several years and we are set to go further down it. I think it is interesting because decentralisation and devolution by themselves are neither good nor bad for equality or poverty because it depends what people do with the power they are given. I think it changes how you try to achieve change, so for instance if you look at in the education sphere, in a kind of old style command and control system, if you wanted to get people to do something, you had to convince a relatively small group of people at the centre that that thing was a good idea. Then you had a fighting chance it would happen in at least some places. In a system where what you have is thousands of schools making individual decisions, what you have got is a massive universe of people who you have to convince to get any kind of change and I think that also cuts across a lot of different areas.

That gives real opportunities for those of us who work across different countries of the UK. It is interesting when you go to Northern Ireland or Wales or Scotland, how much scope there is for people to do things differently, to take on board different kinds of evidence, to experiment with things, to learn from across different jurisdictions. The potential for Manchester to try some things and see if they work and for other cities to learn from them is really exciting, but it is a challenge if you are someone who wants to achieve change nationally because the national levers we used to rely on have become less and less effective.

In terms of how I think we can adjust those challenges, I don't have any simple answers but there are three things which are important threads and where we have been doing a lot of evaluation of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's impact and the impact of our programmes. Three things come up again and again: The first is about thinking really carefully about who exactly holds power. So for any given issue, identifying who are the people who can make the change you want to see? It sounds very basic, but I think it is interesting how many programmes never do that, how many theories of change never actually write that down on a piece of paper: These are the organisations, these are the individuals who can get done what we want to get done, these

are the people to listen to, so let's convince the people they listen to – and actually mapping that out in a practical and concrete way. That is more important now than ever because the old kind of assumptions about how change happens, I don't think hold very good any more.

Second thing is that having good evidence and content wasn't ever enough but I think now more than ever it does not achieve change. As a researcher and working in the voluntary sector, we focus a lot on getting the content right, on being really careful about whether what we say is right, is grounded in evidence, is grounded in experience, which is important. But actually writing a really good briefing note and making it concise and punchy and evidence-based is no guarantee that anyone will read it or take any notice of it, so tailoring what you say and the language you use to those people who have power has become really important. I think again, too much of the way that we all work doesn't take account of that. We have a kind of process and a set of mechanisms we use to get stuff out in to the world, and those mechanisms are a lot about newsletters and emails and putting things out in a broad way.

What a lot of the evidence and the impact assessment that we have done of our own programmes has shown is that that stuff is fine at raising awareness of issues with a group of people working on your issues, but it rarely if ever leads someone who has the genuine capacity to make change to act in the way to achieve the change you want. That leads me to the third point which is that again and again when we do evaluations of the programmes and look at where they seem to have an impact the thing that has made a difference is the relationships. It is always about how people acted because someone sat down with them and talked to them and spent time building a relationship. Doing that takes a lot more resources than writing a really good briefing note and sending it out into the world, but all the evidence suggests that that is how things change, so what is important is identifying who has the power and understanding what those people want.

I think the other thing is that we spend a lot of time broadcasting to people what we want them to hear and remarkably little time understanding what those people care about and what they are trying to achieve. Think about language – the same message said in subtly

different ways can be heard or not heard. I think as a sector we are not very good at thinking hard about whether the language we use; which we are comfortable with, will actually speak to the people who can create change and that brings me to the last point which is that the people with whom we need relationships, quite a lot of them are people we don't agree with about a lot of stuff. They are people who have radically different world views to most of us working on equality, diversity and social justice. We need relationships with those people. I think it is quite noticeable to me that when you speak at events like this one and lots of other events, the bulk of people in the room share a world view. People speak from the platform and there is lots of nodding and kind of 'I agree with what the last person said'. There is a place for that because people need to develop their own argument to strengthen one another. What it doesn't do is create a relationship with the masses of people out there who don't share the world view.

I notice when you get people coming to these and other events that try to talk from a different world view, they get a really hostile reception. I think if we are trying to create relationships with people we disagree with, then those who are brave enough to come to a room full of people they disagree with need to be engaged with as people who have something genuinely useful to say, not just seen as representatives of the enemy. I feel the challenge is to carry on getting the content right, I never want to get away from that, carry on making sure what we say is grounded in experience and evidence, but get smarter about who we say it to and how we say it. I think over the next few years things are going to get harder not easier in terms of making the arguments, so we need to get much better at creating that impact with those individuals, who can make the change.