

THE WEB OF POVERTY:

UNDERSTANDING AND RESPONDING TO POVERTY IN ENGLAND

Definitions matter. The way in which we choose to define a problem influences the solution we offer and therefore shapes our engagement with the world around us.

This short paper sets out Church Urban Fund's understanding of poverty; what is it and how does it affect people's lives? It also explains our approach to tackling poverty and how, through our Together Network, we seek to transform the lives of the poorest and most marginalised in England.

When people refer to poverty in England, they are not generally referring to the complete lack of material resources experienced by millions of people around the world. Thankfully, that kind of 'absolute' poverty is largely absent from this country. Nevertheless, there are many people living in urgent and desperate need.

People in England are understood to be living in poverty when they are considerably worse off than the majority of the population; when they lack sufficient resources to achieve the standard of living society regards as normal. This 'relative' poverty is about exclusion, as individuals and families are barred from participating in 'normal' economic, social and cultural activities.

This kind of poverty matters because of the way it causes physical and psychological suffering. Many thousands of households in this country face desperate circumstances as they struggle to put food on the table, heat their home or clothe their children. This lack of resources causes a great deal of stress and anxiety as people feel unable to take control of their own lives or provide for their families.

Relative poverty is most commonly measured by assessing household income. A household is considered to be in poverty if its net income is less than 60 per cent of the national median. By that measure, around 13 million people in the UK, including 3.5 million children, are estimated to be living in poverty.

The limitations of this measure are widely acknowledged. Poverty is not just about income, or indeed a lack of resources. It is a complex and multidimensional experience that impacts every aspect of people's lives. To capture its complexity, organisations and academics have defined poverty in terms of multiple deprivation, disadvantage, lack of opportunity, powerlessness or insecurity. Yet, despite all that has been written on this subject, a consensus on the best way to define, measure and, therefore, respond to poverty remains elusive.

At Church Urban Fund, we find it helpful to think about poverty as a web of interlinked factors that together, have a significant impact on an individual's ability to flourish.

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1. HOW WE DEFINE POVERTY

We believe that people can be impoverished in different ways. As such, we group the multiple and diverse experiences of poverty into three categories:

Poverty of resources – when people lack sufficient resources, such as income, skills, qualifications or health, to achieve a good standard of living. Where resources are limited, so are people's choices and opportunities.

Poverty of relationships – when people lack the strong and supportive relationships on which individual, family and community life are built, resulting in loneliness and isolation. Where relationships are under pressure or where communities are fragmented and hostile, it is difficult to thrive in human terms.

Poverty of identity – when people lack a strong sense of self-worth and a belief in their own ability to respond to challenges. Where these are missing, it can lead to low self-esteem, a lack of resilience and aspiration, poor mental health and even drug and alcohol misuse.

These issues are complex and closely interlinked, trapping individuals and whole communities in what we call the 'Web of Poverty' (see diagram opposite).

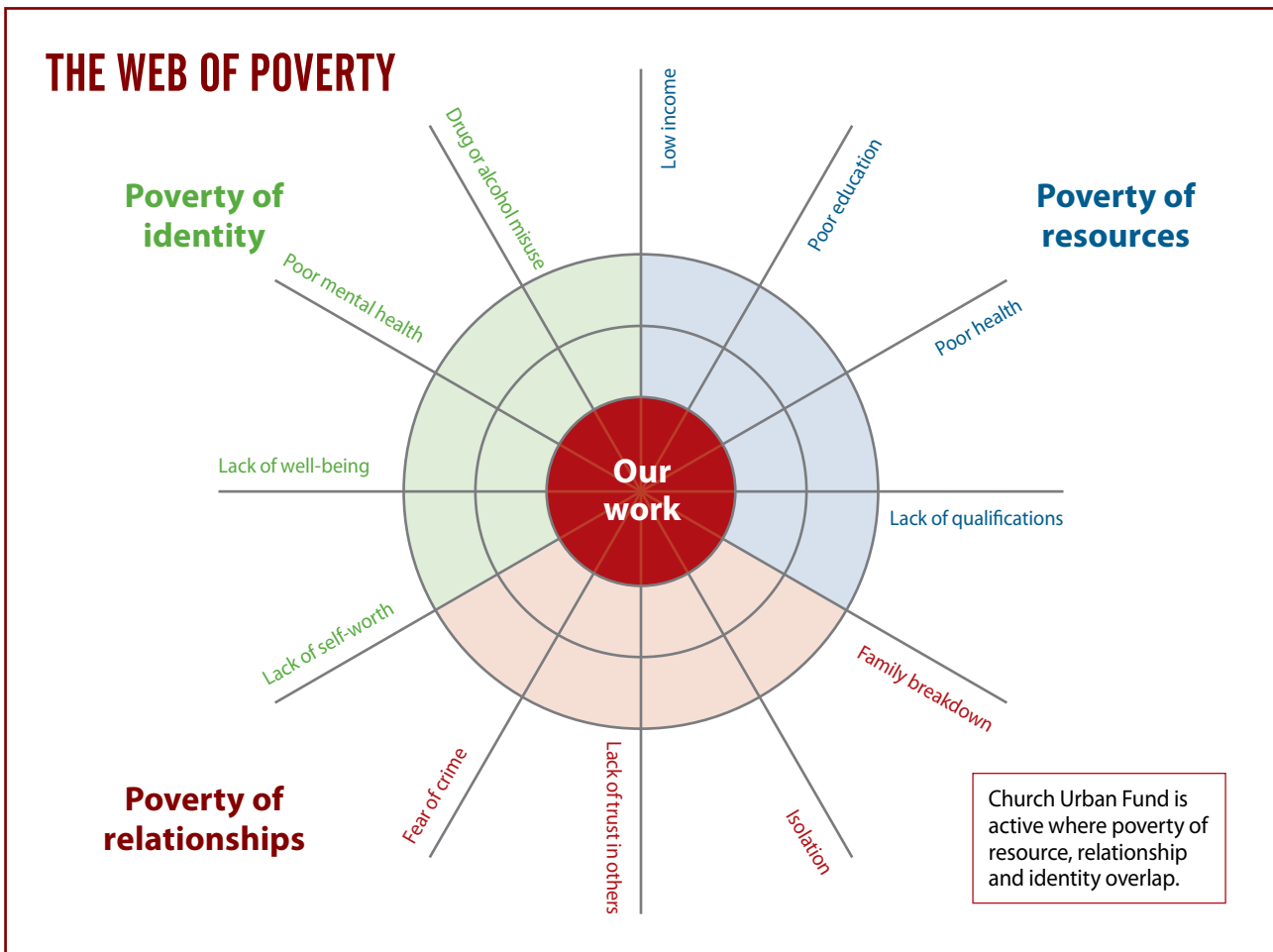
Like a web, poverty is difficult to escape and the cycle of deprivation all too often passes from one generation to the next. A parent's poor educational attainment, lack of opportunities or low self-esteem can have a detrimental effect on their children's well-being; the impact of which is felt right into adulthood and their own experience of parenthood.

While the term 'living in poverty' is generally reserved for those with low incomes, people can be impoverished in many different ways. One individual might have a high income, yet lack a set of strong and supportive relationships; while another might earn very little, yet be embedded in a vibrant relational network. One individual might have a strong sense of self-worth, yet lack the qualifications and skills to take hold of opportunities; while another might be highly qualified, yet suffer from poor mental health.

However, people are most vulnerable and the experience of poverty most extreme where these three aspects of poverty overlap; when an individual lacks sufficient resources, good relationships and a strong sense of identity. These are the people that Church Urban Fund particularly seeks to support.

There is a strong relationship between these different aspects of poverty. Households that have low incomes or live in deprived areas are more likely to experience other kinds of poverty including poor health, family breakdown or a lack of well-being.

For example, boys born in the 10 per cent most deprived areas have an average life expectancy of just 73 years, compared with 83 years for those born in the 10 percent least deprived areas. Also, the percentage of adults who report feelings of worthlessness is almost three times higher in the 20 per cent most deprived areas than in the least deprived. (For a more detailed exploration of the data please visit: www.cuf.org.uk/web-of-poverty).



2. HOW WE RESPOND TO POVERTY

Church Urban Fund's response to poverty is a practical one that takes seriously the complexity of the problem. If people can experience poverty as a lack of resources, relationships and identity, then our response needs to address all three aspects.

We aim to tackle poverty by helping to build communities where people can flourish and thrive because they are embedded in networks of supportive relationships; they have access to sufficient resources to take hold of opportunities; and they are confident in their own ability to respond to and overcome challenges.

Our approach is based upon our Christian faith and the belief that all people are created by God. We believe that each individual, regardless of income or social standing, is of equal and immeasurable worth. We also believe that we have all been created to live in relationship with one another, just as God lives in relationship within the Trinity.

These beliefs lead us to adopt a relational approach. We want to help build communities that encourage and allow space for relationships between and among those who live in poverty and those who do not. Not only do such relationships have inherent value, they are also mutually transformative. They help us to learn from one another and work together to address common needs. They also help to restore dignity as we celebrate one another's strengths and enable each other to feel we can belong to and contribute to our community.

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We want to build communities of participants, not recipients; where people are helped to plan and build their own future, and where they thrive through and in networks of friendship and mutual support, rather than as a result of projects or services being done to them. These kinds of communities build the common good for the whole of society.

Churches are uniquely placed to do this work of building relationships. Local churches offer a long-term commitment to a particular place, an organisational structure capable of managing resources and a dedication to and passion for their work which creates energy for change.

Many churches are already doing fantastic work to tackle poverty and build community – offering material support to those in need and also creating places and spaces for relationships to grow and social networks to develop. Yet, many struggle to continue this work as a result of insufficient resources, a lack of confidence or the difficulty of coordinating with others running similar activities. Other churches are not directly engaging with poverty-related issues.

Our aim is to inform, inspire, resource and support churches as they work to tackle poverty and build strong, flourishing communities. Set up by the Church of England, we do this primarily through the parish system which offers unparalleled access to England's most deprived and marginalised communities.

At the heart of our work is a network of partnerships with individual dioceses called the Together Network. Through this network we aim to enhance, multiply and transform the Church's engagement with poverty at a local and national level by:

- *Growing church-based social action.* We offer churches one-to-one bespoke support as they develop and deliver new social action initiatives; providing advice on strategic planning, governance, volunteering and fundraising. We also make small grants available to kick-start new church-based initiatives.
- *Increasing the capacity of churches to take action.* We run workshops and training events that aim to inform churches about poverty-related issues, share best-practice responses and enable practitioners to develop new skills. This work is supported by our national research programme.
- *Building partnerships.* We develop partnerships between churches, organisations and agencies in order to increase joined-up responses, enable innovative ways of working and ensure people feel supported in their efforts to tackle poverty.

It is through the growing Together Network, and the small grants we make for church-based social action, that local churches can be resourced and equipped to tackle poverty and build flourishing communities.

For more information on the work of Church Urban Fund, please visit www.cuf.org.uk. If you would like to find out more about poverty in England, see our research publications at www.cuf.org.uk/research.

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