

A tale of _____ two cities

Community perspectives
and narratives on inequality,
struggle, hope and change

Executive summary

The Young Foundation

Inequalities are widespread and complex and affect many areas of people's lives. The Young Foundation is a research and action institute with a track record of confronting these inequalities. We work across the UK and internationally to create insight and innovations which put people at the heart of social change.

Acknowledgements

The research that forms the basis of this report was made possible by a generous grant from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. We would like to thank the JRF for their support. We would like to thank the people who took part in this research and helped shape it for their generosity of time and thought.

The researchers

People involved in the research include the communities in the city we worked in, along with Alice Sachrajda, Amy Kwan, Andy Brown, Dr Archana Choksi, Dr Charlotte Heales, Gorka Espiau, Hannah Kitcher, Kristina Diprose, Maia Kelly, Dr Mary Hodgson, Megan Dragony, Nat Defriend, Peter Gerry, Radhika Bynon and Victoria Boelman.

The city, people, places and names have been anonymised. We use pseudonyms and have attempted to broadly disguise people's identities in terms of details, however remaining representative of any relevant demographic information.

Author

Dr Mary Hodgson

Executive summary

Today we are facing unprecedented inequality challenges. Who holds responsibility for the widening gaps in society and how do we solve them? While one mode of change, policy, has clearly had an impact on gains for inequality, people no longer appear to believe the state can act alone and that a combination of civil society actors also have a significant role to play in tackling inequality.

However, while there have been recent calls for a community of common interest there still appears to be an emphasis on change – making solutions and leverage points as residing in the hands either of recognised NGO's, policymakers or formal movements and institutions. The potential voice and role of ordinary people in making change seems to be overlooked entirely. This gives rise to a significant gap in knowledge and voice.

If we worked in new ways, hearing from more of these ordinary voices, and from this created different evidence and insight, would we be able to develop new ideas on understanding and tackling inequality? There is evidence to suggest that if we did this our measures would be more precise and relevant, and therefore that findings and policy might differ. With different insight, we might be able to question prevailing ideas in a more fundamental way and create more leverage points. For example, is an inclusive growth model the best way to create change? Should communities be 'let into' growth, or should we work with another paradigm entirely?

In what follows, we present community perspectives on what inequality is, and how it is experienced, struggled with and resisted. These perspectives – rooted in lived realities – help us to understand inequality in a much more nuanced way than the account typically portrayed in political and media narratives. The lived experience of inequality helps us to begin to see the boundaries of different types of power and decision making; how power feels to those who do not control budgets, spending and decide on services. **Understanding the complexity of communities' experience helps those who do control levers of power, finance and influence to develop better strategies to tackle inequality.**

Applying this understanding begins to identify opportunities for mutual and collaborative approaches which actively challenge inequalities instead of reproducing them.

This summary shares the findings of research which took place over a year in three different communities in a city in the North of England. Furthermore, while the evidence and examples are drawn from one city we have found that its themes chime with cities and places in other parts of the UK and internationally.¹ Further research is necessary to test the practical application of these findings for strengthening community responses to tackling inequality, but we believe they offer some clear pathways to new solutions.

Key findings

Community concepts of inequality

People experience their lives in a complex way, made up of material, economic, social, sensory and emotional experiences, and experience inequality this way too. The challenges people feel they face aren't just found in the economic factors of their lives, but in their social interactions, their sense of value or visibility to others, the way they are served and the few opportunities they have. This means their discussions of their lives and inequalities are often not based around clearly distinguishable policy areas or issues but broader systemic concerns.

People are concerned about resilience and risks, in particular the stressors and disruption inequality places on them collectively, and feel increasingly isolated from support. They view inequality to be driven by external forces. Key elements of concern focus on vulnerability and increasing exposure to risk and exploitation by markets e.g. insecure work and bad pay, poor treatment and lack of services, and market-led housing conditions.

People see inequality as relational, found in the difference between what some have and others don't. **The challenges people face aren't just found in the economic factors of their lives, but in their social interactions, their sense of value or visibility to others, the way they are served and the opportunities they have.** People see inequality in racism, lack of representation and disinterest in young people as well as lack of opportunity and an absence of aspiration for some people. Here, **inequality is felt socially and is deeply stigmatising. This stigma is experienced on a daily basis, having a strong impact on community wellbeing.**

Inequality is deepened by being in a situation you have little control over but others appear to. People feel that inequality has got worse and the ability to challenge those who hold power and resources has dwindled. They identify it as blatant, without constraint.

People understand that the ability to act on the world to change it in credible ways and with influence often comes as a result of resources and social position. This was expressed in terms of some **people possessing – and others lacking – the 'permission' to participate in change**, and represents a new understanding of how inequality works on the structural level.

The role of communities in resisting and challenging inequality

This research shows us that despite these challenges, people are actively trying to tackle inequality. They work hard in small groups, collectively, in communities, with those they are proximate to and share interests with, to challenge inequality and its impacts. This is heavily social in nature and often focused around ‘place solidarity’.

However, this activism is relatively hidden and often goes unrecognised by others. It is micro-dynamic and can potentially be missed: it is invisible to many, or not perceived as the right kind of change. While it is sometimes framed as just coping, it is important to see that these actions are dynamic and innovative. They are trying to make change happen. This suggests that **community-led change is potentially more widespread than believed.**

Here we can see and diagnose that **people are continually creating what we would call practice fields of social innovation.** While these actions and activisms often share similarities with established social innovation practice, they often follow distinctly different pathways: they tend to focus more on collective action, and be driven by solidarity.

These attempts have therapeutic and empowering impacts. People report a stronger sense of community and self-worth when they have acted with others, particularly when they can create spaces which better allow them to practice their values or ideals, and challenge normative behaviour or narratives. This also impacts on how people feel about change and their role in driving it.

There is a small ecology of change in each community we worked in. **When communities come together round an issue, they appear to be able to provide some momentum to create change in new ways, which are not normative or constrained.** This can be uncomfortable for external powers and forces, and can often be rejected in consequence.

“We need to bring the community back together, because it’s got capabilities, everybody’s got something.”

Change-making and community-led innovation in tackling inequality

Activism and change-making by communities can be blocked by what we call permission apparatus. Permissive apparatus can include legislative sanctions, welfare sanctions, health and safety rules and guidance, resource allocations to formal groups, budgets and accountability. This permission apparatus also builds on and can include social factors, such as lack of visibility beyond the community, gatekeeping, lack of 'expertise', lack of recognition and lack of formal roles. This means **permission apparatus is intertwined with inequality.**

Change has 'credible messengers'² and this works in different ways. Narratives dictate that only certain actors or agents within a city region can act, and that change is only valid or interesting, if it is formalised and policy-led, or organised. However, we also see that without community support, trust and representation, 'top-down' change-making attempts are reported to tend to fail: people reported that they got involved with change and activism through their social networks built on trust and proximity, which were often place or valued-based. If change wasn't working, this was often seen to be a key feature of failure or lack of sustainability. Here, we recognise that communities are just as capable of giving change permission or not.

In certain scenarios **communities can develop what we call 'the social permissions to act'**, by working together, encouraging and coaching each other, developing mutual skillsets. In this research, we observed that as they did this they saw how their actions created change and had success, which tended to invite more people they knew into participation. This appeared to create momentum for alternative ways of doing things that were reported to be more sustainable because they had more social and community level support.

What can we do to tackle inequality together?

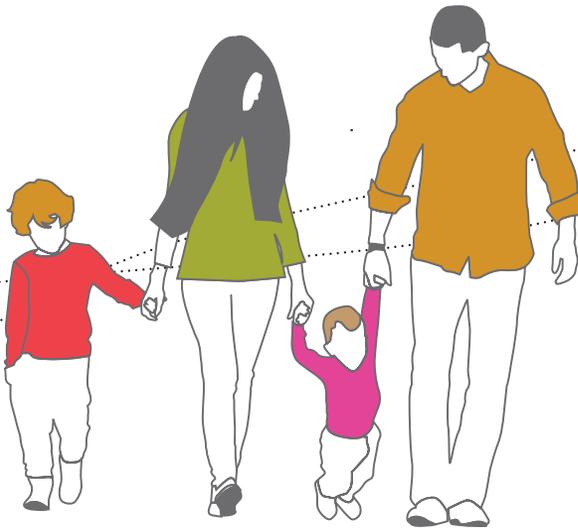
These findings have some radical implications. They share more with us about how change works and how it can be blocked at different stages by assumptions we make about people, how they live their lives and what they have to offer.

It suggests that we now need to recognise the implications: **failing to build an understanding of people's lives, and involving them in change, means that change-making attempts at all levels of society will fail.**

On the other hand, **there is huge potential to scale up the power of hidden activism and change-making**, and to create more impactful systemic responses by building understanding, collaboration and partnership into the practices and decisions of institutions, organisations and businesses.

Rather than just listening, we also need to hear and acknowledge what people tell us about how their lives are shaped by devastating inequality and how that can block them from taking actions.

To solve poverty and inequality, we need to work in a radically different way, one that aligns and redistributes resources of all kinds.



Recommendations

- 1. Policy-makers and local decision-makers need to recognise and value the ways in which communities or small change-makers are tackling or challenging inequality.** Without this recognition, they can't get support or social permission to act.
- 2. Systems should be created for people to have a clear and trusted voice in setting priorities,** and they should participate in its design or recognise it to be needed from the outset, rather than be given a chance only to 'react' to it. This system should create opportunities for people to advocate on behalf of disadvantaged or overlooked communities to support and coach these processes to ensure a pathway and access to redistribution.
- 3. To create change pathways and influence relating to resource redistribution,** involve communities in decision making about resource use in neighbourhoods or transfer assets (not services) with support. Recognise the different modes and expressions of concern people make, which are not always framed in bureaucratic language.
- 4. Funders should recognise that process is as important as outcome.** They need to support the idea that the process of being involved may create greater change than the desired or eventual tangible outcome funding bids so often currently request. A reviewing process is therefore crucial.
- 5. Carry out more experimentation to test the potential for social movements as the way for communities to act.** This would involve establishing centres of practice and learning which would facilitate community priorities and values and align them with funding, skills development and support.
- 6. Carry out further research to understand the mechanisms of change-making;** specifically explore the hidden and educational or transformative aspects of change-making.
- 7. Revisit the lens we apply to community and civic action, and reframe perceptions of community action.** Taking a lens of 'action' rather than inaction would help us diagnose and understand better how to work with communities to support them and make efforts to tackle inequality more sustainable.

Notes

1. For additional reference points to our work see 'Valuing Place: The Importance of Place for Understanding Inequality and Taking Action in Wales' (2017) and 'Humanity at Work: Mondragon, a Social Innovation Ecosystem Case Study' (2017), 'Adapting to Change: the Role of Community Resilience' (2012). Young Foundation.
2. See Smith et al (2015: 308), who reviews who the ideal person is to share stories in order to achieve impact.

