



BROTHERHOOD
of St LAURENCE

Developing dialogues about poverty in Australia

Key findings

Background

The Understanding Poverty project commenced in 1999 and now contributes to the vision of the Brotherhood of St Laurence for an Australia free of poverty, by informing a communication strategy that aims to influence public debate and public policy. The research project focused on two broad audiences; decision makers and members of the wider community. It had two stages:

- The listening phase aimed to increase understanding of the different perspectives of poverty within Australian society, especially what people find unacceptable about it and why it matters, and
- The dialogue phase, informed by these understandings, aimed to explore communication activities that will contribute to the establishment of the eradication of poverty as a national priority.

The second phase focused on the following activities:

1. Testing of communication concepts.
2. Dialogue with decision makers.
3. Dialogue with the wider community.
4. Information products.
5. Community-based forums including seminars, discussion groups, conferences and breakfasts.

National anti-poverty campaign

Early in the second stage and based on the findings of the first stage, a three-year national campaign using social marketing techniques to promote an Australia free of poverty was planned and funding was successfully sought from a private benefactor. The social marketing project will promote and support dialogue with the wider community and will be informed by the findings of the Understanding Poverty project. This second stage therefore explored ways of developing this dialogue based on existing communication activities and some new ones developed in advance of the campaign.

The first stage: listening phase

The first stage of the Understanding Poverty project found that the wider community generally believed government and business have the responsibility to take a lead on action on poverty, while everyone shares the responsibility to resolve it, with the role of people motivating government (as well as vice versa) well recognised. In interviews with decision makers, the federal government was acknowledged to have the major responsibility for reducing poverty; however the responsibility given to the community was to make poverty and unemployment a priority for government.

The second stage: developing dialogue

In response to these findings, the Brotherhood undertook to reflect on current communication activities to determine what works well and what new activities could be trialed with the aim of informing members of the wider community about poverty in Australia and mobilising the community to express their concern about this poverty to decision makers.

This second stage of the Understanding Poverty project recommends some ways for the Brotherhood to engage in dialogue with members of two broad audiences—the wider community and decision makers. In addition, the Brotherhood's existing supporters have been identified as targets of communication activities to ensure that as many as possible become strong advocates in the campaign to establish the eradication of poverty as a national priority. The key findings of this work are summarised below:

Making poverty in Australia visible and mobilising collective action

Inform people about poverty

Both decision makers and members of the wider community want descriptions of poverty to assist them to understand its nature and dimensions, its causes and solutions and to inform public debate.

Because poverty in Australia is poorly understood, communication activities must initially inform the wider community and acknowledge the complex nature of poverty in Australia. The use of personal stories and appeals to a sense of justice and fairness was recommended by both members of the wider community as well as Brotherhood spokespersons.

That story got to me. I was there with the credit card straight away. It was the story of somebody and it could have been anybody... it was only because of her circumstances that she was in that position.

(Higher income earner)

Knowledge about poverty is perceived to be most successfully transmitted when audiences have opportunities to meet with people who have experienced or continue to experience poverty.

Brotherhood spokespersons claim that dialogue which acknowledges that people may have an unconscious unease about poverty engages audience members and sets the scene to promote possible solutions and actions they can take.

Members of the wider community perceived other social issues and concepts of absolute poverty to compete with their concepts of poverty in Australia. They suggested communication activities need to be planned for busy people who are also concerned about maintaining their own standard of living in a society characterised by change and risk.

Today there is conflict between individualism and feeling part of the community. There has been a tremendous growth in the stresses on the individual at the expense of community interest.

(Socially aware/activist)

Educational institutions have been identified by members of the wider community as a main source of information about poverty. Therefore, students, teachers and educationalists in schools, colleges and universities will continue to be targeted by the Education Coordinator to ensure issues of poverty and social exclusion are included in the curriculum.

Information products

Generally, community research found information products and research summaries will be more accessible to a wider audience when presented with a personal story and more strategic when they include actions to take.

Fact sheets were received well by community members. The content could be extended to cover the key issues identified by decision makers, and the sheets could also be made widely available to different audiences.

These key issues included employment and unemployment; income support and welfare provision; availability of services; indigenous poverty; regional and locational issues; intergenerational poverty; family breakdown and the lack of recognition of poverty.

These issues could also be reflected in strategic communication activities targeting press, radio and television news and current affairs, talkback radio, conferences and seminars.

Images of poverty

Images assist understanding. While people express their suspicion of statistics, the Brotherhood should develop multiple images and indicators of poverty in Australia that reveal its complex nature and explain the requirement for complex solutions.

I'd like to know what they classify as the poverty line. They can twist statistics to get whatever they want.

(Low-middle income earner)

Engaging in dialogue with decision makers and the wider community

Take a lead on the eradication of poverty and promote debate

An absence of Federal government leadership and direction to eradicate poverty, which was identified by members of the wider community, can be filled by Brotherhood spokespersons clearly explaining its concept of poverty and how it aims to eradicate it.

As a start, the Brotherhood can provide opportunities for both decision-makers and other community members to engage in informed dialogue about our vision and possible solutions.

Communicate with the sections of the wider community

Attitudes to poverty in Australia were found to range from people who are very concerned to those who are dismissive about it as a problem. Therefore, the Brotherhood's communication activities should be targeted at those who are already concerned, with the aim of mobilising them to take action in the short term. These would include staff, volunteers, donors, customers of retail shops, clients of Brotherhood services, members of Brotherhood Board, Charter members and members of the not for profit and charitable sector.

Communication concepts and ideas identified in the focus group discussions and documented by Johnson (2002, in press) can form the basis of initial activities and concepts for a campaign for an Australia free of poverty. This research supports the provision of 'do-able' actions to establish the eradication of poverty as a national priority. These actions can include sending postcards, signing and promoting petitions, writing letters to members of parliament and to the press (national, state and local) and engaging in talk back radio.

Tell me what to do – if I think I can do it, I'll do it.

(Higher income earner)

The Brotherhood is continuing to develop opportunities and mechanisms to engage in dialogue with the wider community through its interactive website, e-mail, forums, media monitoring and a trial study to explore Australian values.

This research confirms the finding of the first stage, that sections of the wider community are concerned about poverty in Australia. It suggests that a groundswell of public support for an Australia free of poverty, made apparent through expressions of concern directed towards the federal government, will strengthen the position of the Brotherhood in partnership with others, in its dialogue with government.

Communicate with government and influencers of public policy

Personal relationships between representatives of Brotherhood and key policy personnel at all levels of government will, according to the research with decision makers, foster dialogue about poverty in Australia.

Facilitating collective action

Interviews with decision makers in the first stage indicated the Brotherhood would do well to form coalitions with other organisations and facilitate collective action in its journey towards an Australia free of poverty.

The Brotherhood can reflect on its participation in the National Coalition Against Poverty (NCAP) and other work in partnership with other national peak bodies to inform future collective actions. The Australian Social and Economic Rights Project involved the promotion of a decent standard of living as a human right and this approach has been used with a degree of success by NCAP to get people to take action about poverty in Australia. The challenge appears to be preparing Brotherhood staff to engage with service users and customers to mobilise community action on poverty in Australia.

The Brotherhood's national campaign that aims to mobilise the wider community to take action on poverty can contribute to collective actions. NCAP provides a potential network of like-minded organisations with whom to develop and promote products and activities.

Communication strategies

Some younger members of the wider community, and those on lower incomes, want communication activities that point to action and do not ask for financial donations as well.

Communication concepts must grab attention and provide an alternative to the current dominant discourse on poverty that blames the individual, discriminates between deserving and undeserving recipients of income support and does not consider poverty to be a major problem in Australia.

I don't think society should ignore poverty because we will all end up paying the price – having people who are poor and angry.
(Higher income earner)

Communications need to be solution focused and encourage the participation of the wider community in a variety of actions. Communications activities could also provide opportunities to discuss and debate different opinions and points of views about an Australia free of poverty.

Communication activities that aim to involve the wider community as partners in our campaign must be planned, coordinated and resourced to enable timely and positive responses to members of the wider community who do take action. In addition, to engage broad community support, the Brotherhood will need to acknowledge a diversity of views in the wider community and be seen to act on suggestions that are consistent with its vision statement, made to it by supporters and potential partners.

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