

Why poverty – where next?

17/05/2013, 10.00 to 11.30

Public event, Overseas Development Institute, London

Chair

Helen Yanacopulos *Senior Lecturer, International Politics and Development, The Open University*

Panel members

Nick Fraser *BBC series producer, Why Poverty series*

Leni Wild *Research Fellow, Politics and Governance Programme, ODI*

Mark Galloway *Director, International Broadcasting Trust*

Simon Burall *Director, Involve*

The BBC's Why Poverty project was a unique attempt by a UK broadcaster to engage mainstream audiences with the issue of global poverty. This event examined how successful the project was, and asked what lessons can be learnt for any future attempts to engage the public, both in the UK and around the world, with poverty and development.

Introduction to the Why Poverty Project – Helen Yanacopulos, Open University and Nick Fraser, Why Poverty series producer

Helen and Nick gave an overview of the Why Poverty project and its reception by a range of audiences. The series comprised 40 films – 8 long and 30 short documentaries, which were commissioned globally. The films were broadcast in 72 countries, and their distribution involved a wide set of internationally based stakeholders. The series aimed to start a global debate around poverty, and to engage new audiences in these issues. They also discussed viewing figures, including comparisons across countries.

Leni Wild, Research Fellow at ODI, and Simon Burall, Director of Involve, shared their perspectives, drawing from their respective work on public opinion and public engagement in the UK. Leni Wild presented some of the headline findings from research by ODI and the Institute for Public Policy Research into [public attitudes to aid and development in the UK](#). Through deliberative workshops with UK citizens around the country, new insights were provided which revealed both a growing scepticism of what is perceived to be a fairly narrow 'aid story' and an appetite for new stories and a better understanding of how progress happens in developing countries. Simon Burall shared findings from [recent work by Involve](#) which shows that it is possible to engage the public on issues which are complex and far removed from their daily realities – using examples from the field of science and technology which seem to have some applicability to development debates too.

Mark Galloway, Director of the International Broadcasting Trust, drew on IBT's extensive body of research <http://www.ibt.org.uk/research.php> which shows that television remains the main source of information for most people in the UK about the developing world but that perceptions are dominated by negative images which feature in the news and in Comic Relief's Red Nose Day. There is, therefore, a reluctance by audiences to watch programmes about development issues and so most commissioners choose to smuggle these issues into more popular travel and factual entertainment formats. The Why Poverty season took a different approach by tackling the issues head on.

Key areas of the discussion included:

- What can be learnt from the Why Poverty series? The discussion highlighted praise for the Why Poverty series for taking new approaches to covering developing country issues, including widening the lens to explore issues of land grabs, tax evasion, inequality and so on. Nick Fraser stressed that the series pioneered some new ways of working – exploring how broadcasters and foundations could work together, as well as ensuring all content was open access. Others felt that it highlighted the ongoing importance of broadcast media, at a time when social media gets greater visibility. However, challenges were identified, where viewing figures were not as high as hoped. Discussion pointed to two key factors that may have influenced this – the content of the series (were issues framed in the right ways to grab audiences?) and distribution (were they scheduled at the right time/channel to maximise exposure?)

- Constructing narratives around poverty: Panel members discussed representations of poverty and development issues, drawing on presentations by Leni Wild and Simon Burall, who argued that too often, overly simplistic images of poverty and development dominated media and public engagement. The Why Poverty series aimed to offer new perspectives on these issues, although in discussion some felt they had still taken conventional approaches to some poverty issues. Several questions pointed to the need for more stories of progress, agency and how change happens in developing countries. Tensions for the media, who may have incentives to follow 'bad news' stories, were also discussed.
- How best to engage TV audiences on aid and development issues? The panel discussed why the series performed better in some countries than in others and Nick Fraser stressed that TV and its role in relation to development issues can differ in different parts of the world. Moreover, the broadcaster's role in successfully promoting and supporting the series was also emphasised. The discussion also evaluated the form and content of the series. Mark Galloway queried whether the long form of documentary was the best format to employ, and whether it would have been preferable to have a mix of programming, incorporating drama, radio, news and other elements. There was also discussion on the need for more open debate of development policy, and the need to support greater collaboration between broadcasters and development organisations to ensure these issues are better communicated.
- Reporting or campaigning? The relationship between broadcasters and NGOs Was debated too. Discussion centred on potential tensions between the objectives of NGOs and broadcasters, with the former seeking to communicate issues from a fundraising and/or campaigning perspective, and the latter's focus on impartial reporting and journalistic integrity. Nick Fraser spoke candidly about the BBC's 'scarring' experience of the Make Poverty History campaign, when broadcasters were seen to have been too close to advocacy on some occasions. There was consensus that more spaces for discussion and debate between journalists and development campaigners and practitioners was needed on this issue.