

# So what's poverty got to do with it?

## Brighton and Hove Compass Coffee Morning

Saturday 19th July, 10-12:30

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Poverty has far-reaching consequences - not just for those who experience it, but for the wellbeing of our communities, our social fabric, and the health of our democracy

We had two speakers to explore our subject today:

Andrea Cornwall, Professor of Global Development and Anthropology at King's College London and Advocate for Inclusive Development

Reyna Kothari, CEO and Consultant at The Old Boat Corner Community Hub in Hollingbury. She is an adviser to many third sector organisations with strategic planning, finance and community engagement

### PART 1: THE PRESENTATIONS

There were 30 people present and we asked the two speakers to explore not only the human cost of poverty, but what inequality means for our communities, our wellbeing, and our democracy.

They both had very interesting contributions, coming at it from the two different angles. Reyna went first, with her very specific, local, case-based experience. Andrea followed with a national perspective and a framing of the wider issues.

This is a short outline of the key themes and insights summarising the presentations and the discussion and questions which followed:

#### *1. Poverty is complex, widespread, and decidedly human*

Poverty is not caused by a single event - it is a multifaceted crisis affecting housing, food, energy, dignity, and community belonging.

Reyna's personal stories emphasized how quickly people can fall into poverty due to unforeseen events like bereavement, job loss, or illness.

Poverty also touches a wide demographic: pensioners, students, children, and working people whose wages have not kept up with the increasing cost of living.

#### *2. Local realities: the Brighton & Hove context*

Reyna recounted how, in the apparently rich and progressive Brighton:

- 43 people died on the streets last year (one of those present suggested the figure must be an underestimate)
- 50+ emergency food providers support to over 6,400 people.
- Over 1,000 children are in temporary accommodation
- Even professionals are forced into temporary housing or living in camper vans due to housing unaffordability.

- The basic issue is that household money coming in doesn't cover the basic costs
- Energy poverty is especially difficult - people restrict heating to a single room or live without cooking.
- Many families choose between food and heat, or work and childcare.

### *3. Dignity and human needs*

Andrea spoke about how access to shelter, food, and warmth should be framed as basic human rights, not luxuries.

The mental toll of poverty is immense. Reyna mentioned a case where a child wanted to work to support struggling parents. She had a parent emailing at 2 a.m. in despair.

### *4. Systemic and political drivers*

Andrea in particular talked about the prevalent structural failures:

- Cuts in public services.
- Inadequate welfare support.
- Inequality in political voice and democratic disengagement - voters in deprived areas have 20% lower turnout. It is this economic injustice that is the breeding ground for Reform and the snake oil it peddles.

### *5. The role of community organizations*

The third sector (nonprofits, community centres etc) was described as the "fourth emergency service."

Community hubs provide dignified, stigma-free support, offering food programmes, warm spaces, peer-led initiatives like community cooking. But such organizations are overburdened, underfunded, and (in any case) are not a substitute for state responsibilities.

### *6. Global comparisons and inspiration*

Andrea was very keen on the Brazilian model of citizenship education + basic income. It teaches rights, dignity, and democracy and helps women move into skilled trades with confidence and agency. The point is that poverty reduction must include political empowerment as well as economic support.

### *7. Hope and vision for change*

Both speakers envisioned:

- A society where needs are met with dignity.
- People are not just surviving, but thriving.
- Communities have a real voice in shaping services and policies.
- There is a partnership between government and civil society, grounded in mutual respect and trust.

Andrea made a short pitch for Universal Basic Income and also democratic reforms like participatory budgeting and citizen assemblies.

## **PART 2: QUESTIONS**

There were many questions from the floor asking about all sorts of subjects and these were summarised by topic: the powers of local government to impact change, what would happen after devolution, how Reform was doing in the seats where poverty was most prevalent.

Andrea was very insistent about the benefits of writing to your MP and demanding answers, giving examples of how she had even managed to get positive responses from her local MP - Keir Starmer's - office. She also observed that, paradoxically, the Covid crisis had been a catalyst for new democratic initiatives and these showed that there was good reason for hope.

Reyna was keen on citizenship courses both at school and at college and there was a good discussion about that.

Andrea said the single most important thing government can do is to reframe the taxation discussion. This is a subject in itself but she was very insistent that a reframing of the narrative towards how taxpayers were 'contributors' would improve understanding and engagement and pay dividends in fending off the alienation that Farage feeds off with his fabulous stories and easy answers.

Reyna was very strong on the merits of the third sector which is especially impressive in Brighton and Hove and is carrying enormous weight as the state struggles with capacity and direction. The Old Boat is getting 3000 visitors a month.

Andrea was very determined on the benefits of nationalising the water industry although a woman from the floor was sceptical about the economics of this. Andrea also thought that when it came to defence policy we might learn a lot from Costa Rica which famously maintains no standing army.

## **FINAL THOUGHTS**

"Poverty is not just stress and hunger. It's the denial of joy, dignity, and hope."

"How have we got to a point where being warm, fed and sheltered is a luxury for so many?"

"If you have money in the bank and don't need to use these services, you are in a very different position than most people."