WORKING WITH NON-GOVERNMENTAL organisations in Africa in the early 1990s I was involved with the development of participatory methodologies, such as participatory appraisal and evaluation. These were a reaction and a response to centralised, top-down planning processes which catered little for the needs of local people. These methodologies have since found their way from developing countries to the UK.

In the mid to late 1990s I became involved in the evaluation of humanitarian relief programmes in complex emergencies, e.g. famine in the Horn of Africa. A dominant theoretical framework for understanding poverty and famines is Amartya Sen’s Entitlement Theory. Sen proposed that the reason why poverty and famines occur was that people lost their entitlements to live a productive life, through losing their entitlements which enabled them to produce food, to purchase food, exchange goods for food, to inherit or be given food or goods and to have access to land. When people’s entitlements change, poverty and disadvantage can occur.

Since early 2000 I have been working within the community safety domain, initially with Nacro, and currently for Barefoot Research and Evaluation, with a particular emphasis on the impact of crime and disorder on local communities.

Having researched and evaluated many initiatives across the public, private and voluntary sectors, and seen the community response, I am beginning to realise that Sen’s Entitlement Theory can also be applied to issues of community safety. Although we are not dealing with famine, we are still dealing with a vulnerable population who suffer disadvantage, and as a result experience crime and disorder.

For example, people’s entitlements concern the entitlement to:

- The democratic process
- The planning process
- Community resources
- Employment
- Education
- Health care, and
- A community safety response.

In disadvantaged areas many people have lost these entitlements and suffer vulnerability and crime and disorder as a consequence. I have attempted to show the links between loss of entitlements, breakdown in community cohesion and crime and disorder in the diagram above (top-eight).

In general, the poorer a household is, the more vulnerable it is to disruption in its income—supply (clerical or informal employment), its health, education, and access to resources and services. Vulnerability is both a condition of and a determinant of poverty.

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Community Engagement Through Street Parties

STREET PARTIES ARE A powerful way for neighbours to meet, interact and engage with one another. The events are organised and funded by residents, and real social capital is built, much more than the royalty-related history that these events have.

Streets Alive, a charitable group which promotes street parties, has been working with residents and councils on street parties in the UK since 2001. The key tips are: don’t raise money first time; keep any music low; involve all ages.

One leading community in a poorer area of Bristol had 19 street parties in just one year in 2005! The whole self-image of this mixed community has been lifted through the efforts of the residents, and has developed a real social cohesion. Residents say that they feel safer, have a new sense of belonging, feel more relaxed, and now look out for each other – real community safety. They meet an average of eight new neighbours per event.

Street parties alone won’t solve serious community issues, but they can be an important background to other initiatives, and they are cheap to run. The turnout is never less than 50% of households, and usually much higher, and the kids have a chance to play in their own street, without traffic — here is a surprise - street parties of a single street without wider publicity should not normally need public liability insurance, they don’t normally need Temporary Event Notice licenses either. The opportunity for community safety agencies to become involved with residents via the ‘after-event’ surveys developed by Streets Alive. This survey provides an ‘open door’ to offer information and involves often hard-to-reach household residents in local issues.

Our vision is to achieve a UK community spirit similar to that in France, where they have over 5 million people taking part in National Neighbours Day with the full support of the national media.

FOR MORE INFORMATION PLEASE CALL 01244 354092 OR LOG ON TO www.community-safety.net