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This is an electronic version of a paper presented at the ACSP - AESOP Fourth Joint Congress, 06 - 11 Jul 2008, Chicago, USA.

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ACSP – AESOP Fourth Joint Congress, Chicago, USA, 6-11 July, 2008

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Building Community Capacity and Social Cohesion through Resident-Led Evaluation: The Example of Stockwell Urban II Project in London.

Introduction

Over the past 40 years British urban policy has been characterised by a constant flow of new initiatives designed to target resources on areas of deprivation and to encourage local residents to play an active role in the planning and delivery of special programmes. The participation of local communities has been the subject of a variety of experiments, although in the majority of cases elected and unelected decision-makers and stakeholders have retained control of the processes of consultation. In most British towns and cities there are now a profusion of 'special-purpose governance structures' working in parallel with elected councils and statutory agencies. This has been characterised as 'citizen-centred governance' (Barnes *et al.* 2008). However, as the number and variety of these citizens' forums grow, interest in local politics (as measured by voter turn-out) is static or in decline particularly in deprived neighbourhoods.

The academic literature has struggled to make sense of recent developments and there are relatively few large scale evaluations of the extent and impact of community involvement. Sampson *et al.* (2005) demonstrate how this might be done in the USA by taking a broad definition of 'collective civic action'. In Britain people are encouraged to adopt a number of different roles in community-based projects: they may be elected, appointed, invited or encouraged to take part in variety of temporary or permanent forums. The latter also differ widely in the extent to which they determine how resources are used, or merely attempt to influence the decisions of others. Currently, all rungs of Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation (1969) are promoted by a bewildering variety of policy initiatives in different, and sometimes the same, localities. These initiatives are usually locally determined but draw strength from national legislation or policy guidance. The debate is often polarised between those advocating communicative rationalities towards collaborative planning (Healey, 1997) and those who argue that rationality is always subservient to those with power in society (Flyvberg, 1998; Brownill & Carpenter, 2007). Some go so far as to define participation as 'the new tyranny' (Cooke & Kothari, 2001), because structural and power-related issues are often overlooked. Nevertheless, central government in Britain is increasingly promoting legislation to give citizens greater purchase over the services which affect their lives, including a Community Empowerment Bill which will be presented to Parliament in 2008.

Many critics have dismissed traditional approaches to evaluation as pseudo-scientific and usually producing *post hoc* rationalisations of existing policy approaches. Foremost amongst these critics was Aaronovitch who advocated 'democratic evaluation' (Townley & Wilks-Heeg, 1999). He argued this should be 'a radical,

alternative evaluation methodology that aims to extend democracy (through some form of power redistribution) within local communities...' (ibid, p.33):

Democratic evaluation thus rejects the notion of evaluation as an *ex-post* activity used, at best, to inform the design of future policy initiatives. Instead, it proposes that urban policy evaluation should serve to 'democratise democracy' by enabling local communities to assess current policy and directly to influence short-term policy change. (Townley & Wilks-Heeg, 1999: 33).

Thus Aaronovitch's vision was that residents should be directly involved in evaluating regeneration programmes and in the process should build community capacities, develop social capital and reaffirm the primacy of the democratic process. Moreover, the evaluation should not merely reaffirm existing patterns and processes of delivery but should directly promote new and more equitable democratic processes at the local community level.

While early experiments in participation sought to construct forums for local representation in order to access local, tacit knowledge, more recently citizens have been encouraged to adopt a more active role in managing urban regeneration projects. This trend has included the formation of community-based companies and social enterprises to acquire assets (for example land and buildings) and to deliver services not otherwise provided by the public or private sectors. Thus, as well as drawing on local knowledge and enthusiasm, capacities and skills are acquired which improve life chances and provide access to new employment opportunities. In this way, there can be a shift in perception from communities of deprivation to communities of opportunity within complex systems of 'multi-level governance' (Sullivan *et al.* 2004).

This paper explores examines one experiment in 'democratic evaluation' through the medium of a case study of the Stockwell Partnership in Lambeth, one of London's most deprived boroughs. The Partnership has been funded for seven years by the European Union (EU) under the Urban II programme. In particular, it examines the Forward Strategy, Training and Employment Project (FSTEP) which has been training community researchers to interview fellow residents about their perceptions of the area and how it has changed since 2000. The findings from these interviews have fed into an evaluation of the programme and contributed towards a newly prepared masterplan and a Neighbourhood Action Plan.

The paper begins by describing key indicators of deprivation in the area and the nature of the Urban II project. It goes on to examine the main features of the FSTEP project, which involved match funding from a number of agencies and provision of training by a community-based development trust. It concludes by exploring the impact of the FSTEP project and the longer term implications for community activity in the area. Finally, it discusses the more general implications for the future of community participation.

The London Borough of Lambeth

Lambeth is one of 33 boroughs in London which extends south of the River Thames from the central area to the outer suburbs. In the 2001 Census it had a recorded population of 266,170 of which 37.5 per cent are made up of a wide variety of ethnic minority groups. It has a very mixed urban form with an equal variety of land uses and public open spaces. The housing also represents the entire spectrum of urban development from historic streets and squares to post-war social housing estates.

Thus areas of affluence are frequently intermixed with areas of relative poverty. Quality of life and health vary between social groups, although employment opportunities are generally good both within the borough and in adjoining areas. However, there are substantial areas with low average household income and a high incidence of income deprivation affecting children. Overall, Lambeth is the twenty-third most deprived local authority in England.

The government produces a regular Index of Deprivation drawing on Census data from 2001 (CLG, 2004; LB Lambeth, 2004). Each local authority area is divided into a number of super output areas (SOA) for which data on 10 indicators of deprivation are recorded. Lambeth contains 177 SOAs. These demonstrate high levels of deprivation with 50 SOAs in the top 5 per cent in London in relation to crime and disorder, 24 SOAs in relation to deprivation affecting children and 11 SOAs in relation to income levels. 19 SOAs in Lambeth are in London's top 5 per cent for deprivation affecting older people.

Lambeth has a buoyant economy with over 24 per cent working in knowledge-intensive jobs and a third employed in public services. The total number of jobs has increased by 18 per cent between 1998 and 2005 and Lambeth ranks ninth in London in terms of its productivity (Local Futures Group, 2007). However, qualifications and skills levels are low by London and national standards while educational attainment at secondary school level is below average. Approximately 20 per cent of the population have no educational qualifications. The proportion of the population in employment (61.5%) is low by both UK and European Union standards. Youth employment is the third lowest in London (Local Futures Group, 2007: 5).

The regeneration of the borough is co-ordinated by the Council and a series of overlapping partnership arrangements based on the Local Strategic Partnership, in this case called *Lambeth First*. It is made up of representatives of the Council, public service providers and community organisations. *Lambeth First* is currently revising its Sustainable Community Strategy which is designed to provide a mechanism for defining priorities and targeting resources in the borough up to 2020. All other plans and strategies (for example the Housing Strategy and Local Development Framework) should relate closely to this document. The Sustainable Community Strategy is drawn up after extensive community consultation and also contains a commitment to developing strong and active communities. *Lambeth First* is also responsible for the preparation of the Local Area Agreement, which focuses on how central and local government funding will be used to address local priorities and cross-cutting issues. Figure 1 summarises the results of a survey of residents' views with current statistical data.

Figure 1: Results of a Survey of Residents' Perceptions and Current Issues in Lambeth

Set out below are some key highlights from the report.



Source: LB Lambeth, 2007

Stockwell Urban II Project

The Stockwell Partnership area is made up of two wards (Stockwell and Larkhall) in the north west of the borough, as well as some additional estates in Clapham. In 2001 the population of the area was 29,279. The area is very mixed in terms of the ethnic composition of the population, income levels and housing conditions. It has a higher proportion of households renting from social landlords and a lower proportion

of owner-occupation and car ownership. Stockwell also has a relatively higher proportion of unemployment and more people without educational qualifications than the borough average. Almost one in ten households are headed by a lone parent. In summary trends in the Stockwell area demonstrate:

- A high proportion of social housing with poor basic amenities;
- A high and increasing proportion of younger people;
- An increasing cultural diversity in the population;
- Declining employment opportunities in traditional employment sectors;
- Higher unemployment amongst the male population;
- High dependency on public transport and access to local amenities;
- An increasing proportion of the population which is economically inactive;
- Increasing dependency on public welfare services;
- High crime rates and fear of crime;
- A shortage of open space and play space for children.

(Stockwell Partnership, 2002: 4)

The Stockwell Partnership had been founded in 1996 and in 2000 consultants had been appointed to prepare a masterplan for the physical and environmental improvement of the area. This plan formed the basis of consultation carried out in order to bid for European Union funding under the Urban II programme. In 2001 the Stockwell Partnership was awarded a total of £12.2m from the European Regional Development Fund and matching UK sources to develop the Urban II strategy to be spent over six years. There were five objectives:

- To build capacity in the target community to increase local participation and improve access to services;
- To improve the participation of excluded groups in economic and social activity;
- To strengthen and sustain local economic activity in the area through social enterprise;
- To remove barriers to employment through training, advice and confidence building;
- To improve and sustain the quality of the environment in Stockwell.

(Stockwell Partnership, 2002: 2)

Thus although the strategy included objectives to improve services, employment opportunities and local amenities, the primary focus was on building the capacity of the local community and increasing the involvement of local people. Only in this way would the regeneration of the area, which had benefited from previous initiatives such as the Single Regeneration Budget, be sustained:

The challenge for the Urban II Community Initiative is to make local residents central to the process of urban renewal, harnessing the strong and vibrant foundation in the community sector which will build a more diverse economic base, encourage local enterprise and innovation, and empower local residents in the process of regeneration and development. (Stockwell Partnership, 2002: 3).

Over the past seven years at least 45 projects have been funded, many being delivered by local voluntary and community organisations. By 2008 the Urban II funding was largely depleted and the Stockwell Partnership, together with Lambeth's regeneration officers, began to consider options for the future.

Forward Strategy, Employment and Training Project

In the spirit of the Urban II project, it was decided to seek funding in order to train unemployed local people as community researchers in order to carry out interviews with a representative sample of local people in order to assess their perceptions of the area and how it has changed over the last seven years. The results of this survey will feed into an evaluation of the programme as a whole, a revised and updated masterplan for Stockwell and a neighbourhood action plan. This approach was agreed with the London Borough of Lambeth and *Lambeth First*. A consultant was engaged as Project Director while High Trees Community Development Trust would deliver the training programme.

Funding for the FSTEP project was secured from a number of different partners: a further bid to ERDF, Job Centre Plus, *Lambeth First* and L.B. Lambeth. The intention was to recruit up to 30 people in two cohorts from the Stockwell area, who would undertake a specially designed four week training programme, and on successful completion 18 would be employed at £10 per hour as community researchers. In order to access the funding, potential recruits needed to be resident in the area and meet one of the following criteria:

- A lone parent not in work;
- On incapacity benefit;
- Unemployed for more than six months;
- Unemployed and disabled but able to work;
- On benefits for more than six months

The project generated a great deal of interest in the area and 50 applications were received and 34 enrolled for the training programme. All applicants were required to undertake an assessment of literacy, numeracy and IT skills. The training programme ran for 14 hours per week over four weeks and covered:

- Personal development, action planning, interpersonal skills;
- Training for community consultants;
- Introduction to interview skills, questionnaires and data entry;
- Piloting the questionnaire

All those successfully completing the training course were invited to apply for the community researcher posts and applications were assessed by an independent panel. The ten appointed (later increased to 18) were offered 14 weeks employment (16 hours per week) doing interviews and running focus groups, as well as spending one day a week on literacy and numeracy courses. The researchers reported on initial findings to a community meeting in May and to Council officers and members in June. They are also assisted into employment by taking business start-up and social enterprise courses.

Many of the community researchers now feel empowered by the training programme and in their role in determining the future of the area. Molly Kenlock, one of the 18 selected community researchers, wrote:

Forward STEP is a ground-breaking community-led project enabling benefit claimants in Stockwell to apply their local knowledge and experience of living in the community to consult with other Stockwell residents and assess the effectiveness of the regeneration projects in the Urban II programme.

I have lived in Stockwell all my life. I saw the flyer in the local Job Centre and jumped at the chance to participate. Having attended the informal induction, I was thoroughly impressed with the potential accredited training and employment opportunities it offered. For the first time I felt part of the process of 'history in the making' in Stockwell. (Stockwell Partnership, 2008)

The initial results of the questionnaire survey suggest that the community researchers carried out a total of 602 interviews with local residents. These were broadly comparable with the current gender, age and ethnic origin distribution, over 60 per cent of whom had lived in the area for eight years or longer. At least 21 per cent of respondents had heard of the Urban II project and 56 per cent thought the area had changed for the better: 46 per cent thought it was better or much better. 49 per cent considered it more tolerant, while 14 per cent thought it less tolerant. Other questions asked about their perceptions of Stockwell Cross (a transport interchange and local retail centre), and the quality of a number of local services and facilities in the area. A detailed analysis is being prepared by an independent agency and the results are feeding into the revised masterplan and the neighbourhood action plan.

The STEP Project and the Future of Community Participation

The STEP project discussed above is just one example of how local community organisations are playing a more positive role in the process of decision-making about their own area. The Stockwell Partnership demonstrates how a coalition of local interests is able to access resources in order to train those previously defined as 'socially excluded' and deprived in order to develop their own skills and capabilities and thus promote social capital and a sense of autonomy in determining priorities for the future. Clearly, this represents a shift towards Aaronovitch's concept of 'democratic evaluation' in that the local community has been able to increase its role as an important stakeholder in the regeneration of Stockwell. This does not represent an absolute transfer of power but it demonstrates the importance of using evaluative processes as a means to build local capacities. The Stockwell Partnership will be the stronger in relation to other stakeholders in having successfully completed this project. The neighbourhood action plan will be exploring how existing voluntary and community organisations might work more strategically together and, if support from the borough continues, real benefits may result in the longer term.

In England central government is increasingly promoting the role of local government as 'community leaders' and 'place shapers', which involves closer partnership working with local communities (CLG, 2006). In a review of trends in community participation over the past decade, Taylor (2007) concludes on a note of cautious optimism. Many local authorities and other collaborations are opening up new 'governance spaces' in programme development and delivery where local communities can play an active and positive role without being co-opted by those

with power. In this post-modern world there is evidence of increasing diversity in the inter-play of different policy contexts which, in some cases, allow local communities to exert real influence on their own futures. As Taylor concludes:

.....although the new governance spaces that have emerged over recent years are suffused with state power, there are still opportunities for communities to become 'active subjects' within them and thus to shape and influence the exercise of government. This analysis suggests that 'governing beyond the state' is a fluid and dynamic process in which there is a possibility both of power becoming more transparent (and hence more accountable) and of new circuits of power opening up. There are contradictions within processes of government that can be exploited, alliances to be struck and small gains to be made that may start off processes of more fundamental change. However, if these opportunities are to be maximised, this analysis has many implications for both government and communities themselves. (Taylor, 2007: 311).

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