Social Exclusion, regeneration and citizen participation

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Social exclusion, regeneration and citizen participation

This Issues Paper discusses the relationship between citizen participation and social exclusion. It considers the meanings of community participation, describes some recent British experience of community participation in area regeneration and provides some practical advice based on such experience for the development of participation strategies in the Australian context.

Citizen participation and social exclusion

Social exclusion is a term used to signify a range of processes through which economic and social disadvantage are created and compounded. Housing can be seen as both cause and consequence along with other aspects of life chances. The link between social exclusion and citizen participation can be seen as two-fold:

- social exclusion is associated with a range of unequal life chances and disadvantages in which exclusion from political processes is one;

- housing and local environmental conditions matter to people’s health and well-being perhaps even more greatly for those who are poor and may spend relatively more time in the neighbourhood than their better-off contemporaries and participation is a necessary part of securing workable and sustainable living conditions.

Citizen participation is not a substitute for the necessary improvements in the social and material conditions of those who are socially excluded but it is a necessary part of the process of achieving social inclusion.

Citizen participation and community participation can convey a range of meanings. ‘Community’ is often used to mean neighbourhood on the assumption that people share more than a similar residential address. ‘Participation’ can be used to mean processes as different as providing information and devolving control. More specific words such as consultation are clearer.

Broadly it is helpful to distinguish three forms or processes of participation - information exchange, consultation and dialogue over time (in which everyone can see how their views are being influential or if not, why not). A possible fourth category — control — is not strictly participation at all although is often combined with it.

The possible variety of purposes seen for participation by different participants can also create confusion. Three classic purposes are

- Participation is an end in its own right and beneficial for its own sake: taking part is seen as
strengthening democracy and participants’ own democratic habits; there are educational benefits and community development benefits. These benefits can often be seen after the event, for example in the extension into new forms of participation that often occurs after one participatory experience, but they are rarely the reason why citizens are motivated to participate in the first place.

- Participation achieves particular outcomes for the individuals; they are able to defend and further their own interests; participation is seen as the means to the ends of political influence and power. This is the purpose that seems to fit best the motivations of most public sector tenants as they start to get involved in seeking to influence housing policy or management.

- Natural justice: in contemporary liberal democracies, it is often taken for granted that there is a moral entitlement to have the opportunity to comment on matters that are of interest to citizens.

A final issue on which differences of view might occur is that of the issues on which participation might take place. Tenant participation has often been offered by housing managers on issues that are of concern to themselves; tenants may have other priorities and when these are raised it is damaging to the build-up of trust if tenants are told their views are unwanted or inappropriate.

The UK context: A brief history

The historical context for concern in the UK with social exclusion, regeneration and citizen participation is one of a move in policy from a large post-war programme of redevelopment of inner city slums (replaced by new council housing) to a programme of rehabilitation of older housing after 1970 (including much conversion of tenure into housing association rental) to a current pragmatic approach in which demolition and rehabilitation may be combined and in which social rented housing and private sector housing may both be involved.

The problems of the worst neighbourhoods have been tackled in a variety of ways. In England, the latest initiatives include the Social Exclusion Unit, created in 1997, based in the Cabinet Office and accountable to Prime Minister Blair, and the New Deal for Communities, launched in 1998. This initiative is attempting to tackle the ‘worst estates’, using a formula that sounds familiar, but is perhaps more comprehensive than many in the past.

The formula includes the need for involvement by all the agencies with responsibility for service delivery or policy for the area, with recognition of the multiplicity of problems and the inter-actions between them. For example, unemployment is linked to poor educational attainment which is linked to truancy which is linked to petty crime which is linked to a poor estate image, and so on.

There is, therefore, a need for a wide-ranging strategy and for ‘concerted’ and ‘comprehensive’ effort including ‘community’ involvement. There are 17 ‘path-finder’ areas and work continues on developing advice and guidance to local authorities and others involved in these and other initiatives that are attempting to follow similar routes to social inclusion. It is far too soon to know whether this initiative will achieve any success.

In Scotland, a context of a separate policy community and administrative structure, industrial restructuring and high levels of poverty, particularly in the very urban West Central area in and around Glasgow, has led to some different policy approaches. For example, in the late 1970s, the first inner city renewal project involving a partnership of agencies was instigated. The project
pioneered some of the ideas later developed further in the New Life for Urban Scotland initiative of the late 1980s which tackled the problems of four deprived areas (in Glasgow, Paisley, Dundee and Edinburgh) with a high concentration of public housing.

At the same time the government’s Urban Programme continued to provide small sums of money for projects throughout the country intended to assist in the reduction of deprivation at area level. In the early to mid-1990s this approach was amended in the designation of around 12 Priority Partnership Areas in which a smaller overall budget was made available to supplement the programmes of expenditure already running in the areas. Since the change of Government in 1997 these have been renamed ‘Social Inclusion Partnerships’, the number has grown and the concept has been extended to deprived social groups as well as deprived neighbourhoods.

The experience of and level of participation in such projects has varied. Sometimes little more than information provision has occurred. Sometimes tenants have been deeply involved in influencing outcomes. Sometimes the geographical scale has been the individual household, the block, the neighbourhood or wider areas. The emphasis has often been on participation in housing renewal decisions while other public services have been delivered without such attention to consumer involvement.

Increasingly, community representatives have been involved at the highest formal level — the key co-ordinating and management boards — sometimes not without difficulties. This type of participation places a heavy burden on community representatives, who are rarely supported by the same level of office and information resources that public servants take for granted.

The last initiative to mention is one that had its origins in the establishment of ‘community-based’ housing associations in the deprived inner city neighbourhoods of Glasgow from the mid-1970s. This concept has now been extended to areas of public housing, usually on the periphery of towns and cities and in need of investment. The ownership is transferred to new associations made up of local people, with management committees largely composed of tenants. Staff are employed to advise and assist the process of renewal and to manage the housing stock.

The associations often become the base for a variety of other community activities, including job creation, play-schemes, child care, community care and work-space management. The ‘public interest’ is protected through the supervision and regulatory role of the government funding agency, Scottish Homes.

**Processes, resources, experiences**

In debates about how to promote community participation, professionals are often anxious to know what type of technique or structure is ‘best’. This tends to under-state the importance of what takes place within advisory committees, public meetings and so on.

Whether any meeting or series of meetings actually achieves a particular form of participation depends on a number of things such as the attitudes brought to the table, the openness of the agenda, the quality of the chairing, the follow-up to the meeting and so on. There may be very similar-looking structures for participation in two different places that achieve very different outcomes because the attitudes and resources brought to the process may be very different.

This is particularly important for public servants and politicians to bear in mind in considering their
own attitudes and behaviour, but there may also be a need for them to consider the relevance of this issue for the residents involved who may be sceptical and distrustful, attitudes that may need to be broken down before dialogue can take place.

**Conclusions and lessons**

There is now a lengthy record of initiatives that have attempted to bring residents and tenants into the process of community renewal in many parts of the UK. Attempts to move in similar directions in Australia, while taking place in a very dissimilar policy framework and tradition, are nevertheless likely to encounter similar problems.

The following 12 points, derived from research conducted into participation policies the UK, may be useful in informing the development of similar strategies in the Australian social housing sector.

- Participation by residents presents a challenge to the traditions of public service and to the skills and qualities of politicians and public servants: there is a need for training and support for the professionals as well as for residents.

- Participation can cause confusion, because of the ambiguity of the language and the unexpected outcomes and events that may occur: there is a need for clarity as far as possible by public agencies about what they are offering, how far they aim to go and what they mean by ‘participation’.

- Participation consumes resources and the need for and availability of resources to support it requires planning: time, material, skills and expertise are required.

- Participation rarely fails to provide surprises: it can lead to outcomes that could not have been anticipated, particularly if it is successful at achieving dialogue; participants may place unexpected items on the agenda and together participants may come up with unexpected recommendations or conclusions.

- Different parties will have different agendas: all need reasons to participate: restricting the agenda to the issues the public servants want discussed can have a demotivating effect.

- Participation is a learning experience and people will learn by doing: this can be enhanced through the provision of opportunities for exchange and reflection.

- Participation often leads to disappointment as well as surprise: some of the disappointment arises from unreasonable expectations about, for example, the number of people to expect to attend a public meeting but other disappointments have less obvious origins and may need to be used as positively as possible as learning experiences.

- Public agencies need to show they acknowledge the concerns and issues that others want to raise and if possible respond in tangible ways that build confidence and trust.

- Participation should start far enough back in the planning and policy process to allow meaningful participation to take place but this is advice that cannot always be taken, given the duration of most policy processes; it is better to start participation late than not at all but the stage in the process needs to be made clear.
Some participation exercises have foundered because residents have not been kept in touch with developments, including 'non-developments'; to build and sustain trust it is crucial to keep in regular contact even when the news to convey is that there is no news. In addition it is crucial to respond to the community’s views and especially important to explain why requests are not being met.

No double standards should be applied, for example, in commenting on the representativeness or accountability of community representatives; if community ‘representatives’ are demonstrably unrepresentative there are supportive measures that may be offered to assist them to be more representative or alternative ways of gaining community views can be found.

Persevere: do not give up — it may require tenacity and time to build the trust that is required to sustain participation.