

Neighbourhood images in Liverpool

There is a growing recognition that the needs, aspirations and potential of people and communities in disadvantaged areas need to be taken into account if urban regeneration is to become sustainable. This study of two neighbourhoods in Liverpool - conducted by members of the Department of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work Studies of the University of Liverpool, led by Ronnie Munck - examines the residents' own perceptions in this regard. The research found that:

- f Residents expressed quite basic needs, including minimal provision of shops, adequate transport, standard amenities and access to employment opportunities.**
- f Residents recognised the severely disadvantaged nature of their neighbourhoods but also displayed considerable pride in their areas, which would seem to reflect a considerable underlying level of social cohesion.**
- f There was a widespread feeling of loss, especially amongst older respondents, in relation to the closure of shops and workplaces in their area, but this did not necessarily indicate a general resistance to change.**
- f The words "It's all down to the people ..." captured a mood amongst many respondents that in creating the social fabric of a community it is necessary to build on the existing relations of reciprocity and trust within the two communities.**
- f Women emerged as the mainstays of community organisations, often stemming from the networks developed in their role of providing care for children and other family members.**
- f There is a widespread feeling that community participation in urban regeneration initiatives is less than substantial and that regeneration needs to deliver tangible benefits in the short term and not just in some unspecified period in the future.**

Basic needs

The two neighbourhoods studied - Dingle and Speke - suffer from long-standing, multiple and interlocking forms of deprivation. This has not, on the whole, resulted in despair and a considerable level of social cohesion was evident. Young respondents in particular wanted basic social amenities:

"A shopping centre ... a cinema ... a drop-in centre where you can go and just mix with people ... if there was a drop-in centre, people from the outside would be able to come to it and see how nice the people in Speke are ..."

"A youth club would be good ... A proper one, not just a church or a school. There should be more nurseries for the very young ... more stuff for the kids, for the different generations ... you need a bit more stuff for older people ..."

With around one third of the working population unemployed, jobs were obviously one of the most pressing issues:

"I just want to get a good job really and just be happy. I don't want to be on the dole ..."

"Give people more jobs, the people would all be decent then. Build new businesses and all that ..."

Pride and shame

Most residents understand that their neighbourhoods are less than ideal places to live in but resent being told so by outsiders, especially the labelling of the residents which goes with it:

"They don't recognise the problems we have here ... They think the people are lazy ... They're not used to seeing poverty ... We don't need an outsider coming in and telling us what a dirty show it is. We know that ..."

Young people in particular resent the sharp, persistent but often unwarranted labelling which occurs with residents from these areas:

"They think that we are all dead common and rough. They say they don't go there because they'll rob your car. If you go to places where they hire stuff they won't let you. That MP [Paddy Ashdown] came to Speke and said it was like Sarajevo ... people think we are all druggies ..."

But there is also a fierce pride in the locality:

"I think there is still a bit of community ... We have a lot more than they have in the suburbs ..."

"They're really lovely people around here ... there are a lot of generous people who are very good-hearted ..."

Loss and change

There is a widespread feeling, particularly acute in older residents, that their neighbourhoods have been allowed to decline. There is a sense of loss, practically betrayal, summed up in the expression *"They've just left it to fall to bits ..."*.

All residents can recite the litany of shops that have closed in their area and the feeling of isolation and neglect that this has led to. This contests with a memory of times when *"... things were better ..."*, there were jobs to be had locally and residents were proud of where they lived.

What is probably most remarkable is the considerable optimism which still exists regarding the possibility of progressive social change. Residents have struggled for many years to achieve some transformation of their neighbourhoods, facing countless setbacks and frustrations. This has not led to widespread apathy or resignation, a belief that nothing can change:

"... in all honesty if we really believed that, none of us would be here now, you wouldn't be involved ... but deep down we still believe that something can be done ..."

Attitudes to change

The talents, energy and commitment of the residents are clearly untapped resources in these neighbourhoods. There was considerable self-

confidence that they knew what needed to be done to improve their areas:

"They tell us we need professionals to come and sort us out. No, we don't. We want the money so we can do it ourselves ..."

It was the people of the area - the network of families and friends with the mutual support which they offered - that for most people defined their neighbourhood. As one resident put it: *"It's all down to the people ... We've got a brilliant community ..."*. The dense network of family and friend relationships were what made these cohesive communities: *"it gives a nice, warm feeling to know that they care"*.

Of course, a 'close' community can also be a 'closed' community when it comes to those deemed interlopers or outsiders.

Women and community

As one community development worker in Dingle put it:

"We have always had a good community base around housing issues, it is mostly women ..."

Indeed, in both neighbourhoods studied, women were particularly active in maintaining and developing social networks often, but not always, centred around their care-providing role in society.

Women are not only involved in self-help schemes of various kinds but are central to the day-to-day running of voluntary and community organisations in the two areas:

"The men put on the suits and try to be helpful but basically the women run the houses and the homes ... They also run all those types of groups ... At the PTA meetings, it's always women there ..."

"You can't seem to get them [men] involved with the kids, even to get little football teams or anything like that, you can't ..."

Women in both areas expressed their deep concern with recent changes in government policy towards lone parents:

"They want women to get back to work, but how can a woman go back to work without a crèche or after-school facilities?"

Attitudes to consultation

Consultation, involvement and participation are all relative terms and seem to suffer from conceptual fluidity and imprecision. As one Dingle community worker told us:

"Consultation is a poor thing. Involvement from the beginning is by far preferable ..."

While there are occasions when regeneration efforts have met with knee-jerk reactions of suspicion or even hostility, scepticism by residents about regeneration seems to be well-founded:

"People feel let down ... When this Speke/Garston [Partnership] thing first started up the turn out was good. People from the community were there asking questions but after a while there was not one going because they felt that their questions were not being answered ..."

Or as one Dingle resident put it:

"People do get involved [but] whatever you say, it doesn't make any difference. You spend all that time in a committee discussing and trying to help the area to get better, but then it's decided by someone who doesn't even live here ..."

About the study

This is one of four linked local studies, commissioned as a mini-programme within the JRF Area Regeneration research programme. The others look at East London, Nottingham and Teesside.

The fieldwork for this project was conducted between October 1997 and May 1998 and involved the use of a range of qualitative research methods. A community/social audit provided background information from secondary literature and from local/government statistical sources on the history and demographic characteristics of the two areas. This information was supplemented by a series of

informal meetings with key people from the community, voluntary and statutory sectors. Twenty semi-structured interviews were also carried out with individual activists and community workers who held key positions within the two communities (in either a voluntary or paid capacity).

Twelve focus groups were organised (six in each area), with the aim of encouraging in-depth discussion of people's personal experiences within a relaxed environment. Participants were recruited through contacts established during the exploratory early stage of this research. Given the aims of the research to concentrate particularly on age and gender dimensions, the sessions were grouped by gender as well as age. The number of people participating in each group ranged from six to twelve.

To facilitate the discussion a rolling interview guide was used which looked at four main themes: neighbourhood and image, experiences of living in the neighbourhood, improving the neighbourhood and expectations for the future.

In addition to the above, the researchers carried out a survey of local newspaper coverage of the two areas and gathered a wide range of photographic material arising out of group workshops, jointly commissioned with Artskills (a community arts group) to build up an understanding of how peoples' images of the two areas were constructed.

How to get further information

The full report, **Neighbourhood images in Liverpool: "It's all down to the people"** by Helen Andersen, Ronnie Munck et al. (ISBN 1 902633 30 X), is published for the Foundation by YPS.