

## Community involvement in rural regeneration partnerships

A central element of rural regeneration partnerships and local area development has been the involvement of local communities. Yet it has been suggested that views about such involvement are optimistic and that in practice there is still limited community participation. The study seeks to assess the nature, process and impact of community involvement in rural partnerships in the different national contexts of England, Northern Ireland and Scotland. Researchers at Aston University, Glasgow Caledonian University and the University of Ulster found that:

-  Rural regeneration partnerships operate at three overlapping structural levels: at the strategic, the intermediate and the community levels. There was a relative lack of involvement at the strategic level.
-  The differing policy contexts in the three nations influenced the way that partnerships developed, particularly in the varying powers of local government and the role of EU funding.
-  Rural communities face distinctive issues in engaging with partnerships. Geography can create transport and communication difficulties; low population densities lead to great demands on the people available; and strong local community identities can inhibit the development of sustainable regeneration partnerships across wider rural areas.
-  Few community representatives had a formal mandate from their communities. The timescales and processes of partnership militated against this.
-  Local voluntary and community infrastructure was critical to the effectiveness of community involvement in rural partnerships.
-  Ways in which sustainable and effective community participation in rural partnerships can be enhanced include supporting networks, providing opportunities for early successes through small-scale funding and learning from experience, training that is sufficiently responsive to the needs of and constraints on community participants, and allowing sufficient time for trust to develop.
-  The researchers identified six components of good practice: getting the right individual in the right project; using different organisations and structures to develop community involvement at different levels; clarifying the nature of community involvement sought; ensuring that appropriate funding is available; ensuring that strong local voluntary and community infrastructure are essential to promote and support community involvement; and building in proper evaluation so as to enhance future practice. This last was the area of greatest weakness

## Background

Over the last two decades, public-private partnerships have become a core element of rural regeneration. Increasingly, a central element of rural regeneration partnerships and local area development has been the involvement of local communities. Yet it has been suggested that such views are optimistic and that there is still limited community participation in rural partnerships. To date, there has been only limited evaluation of the nature, process and impact of community involvement in such partnerships. This study identifies five key themes, and makes recommendations to attempt to redress that gap.

## The policy context

The three-nation comparative element was important in this study for two reasons:

- To highlight the impact of different national institutional contexts, and their contrasting policy frameworks, on community participation. This is important for policy-making in the UK, where policy has often been determined and evaluated on the basis of English experience alone. This research has contributed to addressing this imbalance.
- To contrast community involvement in rural partnerships within three different modes of power for local government:
  - in Northern Ireland, where many partnerships are funded by the EU, with local government having comparatively limited power in resources;
  - in Scotland, where local government still has the lead role in many such partnerships, including community planning;
  - in England, where local government is, at best, 'first among equals' in local power structures, whilst regional bodies have started to exert power and influence.

Another important aspect of current policy is the growing debate within the UK government and in the voluntary and community sector about the role of the sector in delivering public services and promoting citizenship. The role of the voluntary and community sector in delivering services in rural areas has been highlighted; it is recognised that it is challenging for the sector to meet such demands.

## Partnership structure and community involvement

The study found that each partnership was embedded in its own complex web of inter-organisational networks. The strength of this is the potential for innovative ideas to emerge from the interaction, and at times conflict, of different organisational perspectives. The weakness is the premium that it puts on the negotiating skills of the 'partnership managers' and the high transaction costs involved in terms of time and resource commitment.

Three structural levels of partnership were

identified - strategic, intermediate and community. The complexity of structures and funding arrangements meant that sometimes these levels overlapped. The partnerships explored in this study are outlined in Box 1. The study found a comparative lack of community involvement in the strategic levels of many partnerships.

### Box 1: Levels of community involvement in rural regeneration partnerships

- At the strategic level, the key task is funding partnerships and/or planning regeneration initiatives. Community involvement tended to be limited to consultation and involvement by proxy through intermediary agencies and community activities. Examples include Groundbase (Dumfries & Galloway) and Community Action for Rural Devon.
- At the intermediate level, the key task is programme management. This included the involvement of some community activists, and providing a bridging role for agencies to represent and advocate community needs at the strategic level. Examples include Moyle District Partnerships and the Key Fund in North Antrim.
- At the community level, the local community was often directly involved in community regeneration partnerships. Services were planned and owned by the community with the support either of a professional community development worker, employed by an intermediary body or the local authority, and 'animateurs' based in local communities. Examples include Luce 2000 and the Newton Stewart Initiative in Dumfries and Galloway.

Two views were expressed on the comparative lack of strategic involvement: community members could not be expected to operate within the strategic policy-making arena, because they lack the skills to do so; and that such arenas were structured to exclude them.

It is clear that rural regeneration policy, and the strategic management of region-wide partnerships, remains dominated by the professionals and pre-existing agencies of community development and regeneration. It may be that community involvement at the strategic level is an unrealistic aspiration. Many respondents argued that most community members are more interested in the real services delivered to their community and its regeneration.

Funding structures presented significant problems to community-level partnerships. It appeared that the challenge of coping with complex and changing funding arrangements contributed to the partnership and regeneration fatigue that was beginning to emerge in some of the case studies, as was exemplified in one annual report:

"All the roller-coasters that seem commonplace in voluntary sector life, playing piggy in the middle with debtors and creditors, having too much work and not enough staff hours, ... the uncertainty of funding, ... does not help in being responsive to local need and confident in the future of the organisation."  
Annual Report of case study organisation.

A theme on the nature of accountability and mandate emerged from the study. Representatives of public agencies within partnerships invariably acted with the mandate of their agency. However, this is more problematic for community representatives - few had a formal mandate from their community, or sometimes they could be contested. At the least, time was required for community representatives to report back and consult with their constituency – but both the timescales and processes of partnership management militated against this. This problem was exacerbated in remote rural areas. If the key public agencies are serious in their commitment to community involvement, it is important that these issues of management and timescale be addressed.

### Rural influences on community involvement

Three rural elements were found to be particularly influential on community involvement in partnerships:

- the influence of local geography, such as a mountain mass to be negotiated, and the sheer size of rural areas upon community involvement, particularly with regard to transport and communication difficulties;
- the composition of rural demography impacted on the people available for community involvement, in particular the low population densities of many rural areas and the loss of young people to the educational and work opportunities of urban areas;
- the strength of community (of place) identity in isolated villages, which can often militate against their joining with, or learning from, other villages or market towns, where economies of scale may mean the difference between the sustainability or not of a partnership.

"...many of the rural communities have a strong identity of their own. ... People look to their own community for support. This can be a real strength, ... but it can also make them inward looking ... (sometimes) people will help each other but won't help other (communities). This makes it hard to bring villages together in larger forums."  
Co-ordinator of a Local Development Agency.

### The impact of voluntary and community infrastructure

A particularly influential factor in all three regions was the strength of the local voluntary and community

infrastructure. This took several forms:

- the work of 'traditional' Local Development Agencies (LDAs);
- the cross-regional forums of all LDAs;
- cross-agency programmes that offered support to local communities;
- smaller-scale local groups which acted as independent infrastructure bodies.

This range of effective infrastructure was critical to the effectiveness of community involvement in rural partnerships. It provided technical assistance and expertise, and supported small-scale funding schemes. This built expertise and confidence, and helped to develop the capacity of individuals and groups to participate in regeneration partnerships.

### Key skills for community leadership

The most critical concept for effective communities that emerged in this study was that of community leadership. Four community leadership roles were identified, each of which was recognised as being pertinent to key stages in the life cycle of rural partnerships: inspirational champion (initiation); entrepreneurial (development); managerial (implementation); and governance (sustainability).

Six findings about the development of key skills and knowledge for effective community involvement in rural partnerships have emerged from the study.

- Participants need time to learn how to work together and to trust each other. The formal objectives, targets and funding regimes of regeneration partnerships can often inhibit this important aspect of partnership development. A further limitation is that the short-term nature of many posts funded through partnerships can mean that knowledge can be lost when funding ceases and a key individual moves on.
- Partners need to recognise that they all have development needs.
- Formal training programmes received a mixed response from the partnerships studied here. Whilst some groups welcomed training, in other areas logistics and timing were problematic.
- The importance of early successes was critical to the development of confidence of local groups.
- Learning through experience was recognised as playing a vital role in the development of relevant skills in rural areas.
- Networking opportunities, including international exchanges, enabled community groups to gain exposure to a diverse range of knowledge and experience.

### Conclusion

Many respondents expressed concern that insufficient attention was paid to the issue of the sustainability of partnerships and community involvement in them.

Many highlighted that the small pool of people available in rural areas could often lead to over-commitment, overwork and burnout. The study found no easy answer to this problem, bar the promotion of initiatives (such as small-scale funding schemes) that encouraged the growth of skills and resources.

The study has, however, identified six components of good practice that the researchers believe will enhance the long-term sustainability of community involvement in rural partnerships.

- There is a need to get the right type of individual, in the right project, at the right level of partnership – and at the right stage of its 'life history'.
- There is a need to use different organisations and structures to develop community involvement at different levels within a region – and to ensure there are good vertical links between these levels.
- It is important to clarify the nature of community involvement sought. At the community project level, one is looking for direct community ownership of a project and involvement in partnership management. At the strategic level, though, one is seeking more appropriate structures that represent the views of local communities and are accountable to them – but where individual members of these local communities may not have the confidence or interest to be involved in strategic level discussions.
- It is important to ensure that appropriate funding is available to support community involvement. The impact of small-scale funding is emphasised where there is a catalytic element to the funding – as well as enabling the development of a particular project, it also enables individuals in the community to gain skills and confidence in partnership working. The study also identified the need to support individuals financially by covering their transport and other essential costs - this was often apparent by its absence.
- Strong local voluntary and community infrastructure is essential to promote and support community involvement. This acts to promote individual and community learning, and provides the essential links between the different levels of involvement identified.
- Evaluation is essential – not just of the impact of particular projects but especially of the process of community involvement. Without this, there is a danger that important lessons will be lost as the membership of local communities change. This was the area of greatest weakness identified. A plethora of monitoring mechanisms was used in the partnerships explored in the study. The overwhelming majority, though, were concerned with accountability mechanisms for public money. This is an important issue in its own right, but none

of these mechanisms was focused upon enhancing community learning and the sustainability of community involvement in rural regeneration partnerships in the long term. This is the key challenge for the future.

### About the project

Members of the Public Management and Sociology Research Group at Aston University, the Voluntary Sector Research Centre at Glasgow Caledonian University and the Centre for Voluntary Action Studies at the University of Ulster conducted this project.

In each national setting, local cross-sectional case studies were supplemented by interviews with senior informants in the government, voluntary and community sectors. The local case studies were conducted in North Devon in England, Dumfries and Galloway in Scotland and North Antrim in Northern Ireland where both local key informants and local partnerships were interviewed. For each partnership, interviews were conducted with the key organisational stakeholders and with the local community. Documentary evidence was also consulted. The project was delayed due to the foot and mouth epidemic of 2001; notwithstanding the tragedy of this epidemic, it provided an important perspective on the work of partnerships in distress. The authors gratefully acknowledge the contributions made by all interviewees.

### How to get further information

The full report, **Community involvement in rural regeneration partnerships in the UK: Evidence from England, Northern Ireland and Scotland** by Stephen P Osborne, Rona S Beattie and Arthur P Williamson, is published for the Foundation by The Policy Press (ISBN 1 86134 495 3, price £13.95).

The following *Findings* look at related issues:

- **Partnership working in rural regeneration**, Oct 99 (Ref: 039)
- **Social care in rural areas: developing an agenda for research, policy and practice**, May 00 (Ref: 5110)