

## Creating effective community networks in urban regeneration

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Local authorities concerned with assisting the development of effective community networks should not ignore the importance of personal networking or the staff time and resources necessary to allow this to happen, according to new research from a team at the University of Birmingham. The researchers spoke to a range of people involved with community networks in different ways. They found that:

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- f** To be effective, formal partnerships need to be rooted in informal processes of networking, characterised by a sense of trust, co-operation and mutual advantage.
  
- f** Community regeneration networks rest heavily on the motivation and skills of individuals.
  
- f** Networking is a constant balancing act between the possible costs of involvement against uncertain longer-term gain, and between an organisation's own interests and those of the wider community.
  
- f** The opportunity to network through social events (conferences, etc.) and the capacity to engage - in terms of time, organisational support and resources - underpin the development of effective networks.
  
- f** Some groups are significantly less advantaged than others in their opportunity and capacity to network; for example, women's networks or black groups.
  
- f** Developing sustained urban regeneration and new forms of community guidance depends on how these networks are supported and maintained over future years. To this end, the research identifies two issues - widening involvement and strengthening resourcing.

As the policy agenda for urban regeneration has widened over the last three decades, new organisational arrangements have also developed. In the 1970s, local authorities had a key role defining and delivering urban regeneration projects, drawing heavily upon Urban Programme funding. Towards the end of the 1970s and into the 1980s, two-way partnerships became more common, with an emphasis on public-private joint ventures concerned with major physical regeneration schemes (for instance, through Urban Development Corporations). In the 1990s 'multilateral' networks and partnerships of public, private, voluntary and community sectors are the preferred organisational form, driven both by local imperatives and by central government funding programmes like City Challenge and Single Regeneration Budget (SRB).

The breadth of concerns now represented in urban regeneration policy suggests that this spread of involvement is appropriate. Urban regeneration policy now covers:

- enhancing the physical condition of localities;
- stimulating the local economy;
- tackling social and community issues;
- building sustainable urban regeneration through 'capacity building' at the local level.

Through case studies and interviews with those involved, this project set out to identify what factors assist or impair effective networks and to assess the capacity of partnerships to respond to the needs of inner city communities.

### Networks and partnerships

Community-based networks operate through links between individuals with shared interests. Networks are informal arrangements with indistinct boundaries and fluid memberships while 'partnerships' are part of formal regeneration programmes and characterised by a company or board structure, clearer boundaries and fixed membership. Partnerships may be formed on a voluntary basis or they may be imposed as part of the qualification process for funding, as in the case of the Single Regeneration Budget. Formal partnerships do not in themselves guarantee meaningful relationships; they need to be rooted in informal processes of networking, characterised by a sense of trust, co-operation and mutual advantage.

Interviewees felt that the benefits to urban regeneration of working through community networks were:

- ease of information exchange;
- the development of shared perspectives and new initiatives;
- opening-up the management of the regeneration process to include local business and the voluntary and community sector;
- power-sharing within the urban regeneration process.

### Who are the members of networks?

Despite greater openness in urban regeneration networks in recent years, some groups are significantly

less advantaged than others in their opportunity and capacity to participate. Becoming a member of a network involves negotiating a series of hurdles:

- At the *individual* level there are objective factors (like time commitments or access arrangements) and subjective factors (for instance, whether one feels one's involvement is likely to have an effect).
- At the *institutional* level, agencies provide a context which facilitates or hinders their staff's involvement in networks; the availability of resources and the agency's own past history are important factors.
- At the *societal* level, there are barriers of class, race, gender and locality. Women's networks and networks of black groups may remain invisible and unrecognised by policy-makers. Local activists who have been campaigning for years may feel suspicious of policy-makers' sudden enthusiasm for 'participation'. Where marginalised groups enter mainstream regeneration networks, they may feel themselves disadvantaged in terms of status and a knowledge of the 'rules of the game'.

Interviews and workshops revealed a variety of attitudes to community regeneration networks. The study identified four broad types:

- *Enthusiasts* believe that networking has opened up urban regeneration, encouraging greater community participation and novel approaches to urban issues. They value networking because of its ability to overcome the constraints of bureaucratic systems, organisational boundaries and parochial, institutional politics.
- *Activists* view networks as a managerial approach to ensure that strategic goals are met and that regeneration initiatives are delivered in an integrated way (given the fragmented nature of agencies and services).
- *Pragmatists* see networks as a necessary evil - a means of securing funding from central government and European sources.
- *Opponents* are openly hostile, seeing networking as circumventing traditional democratic processes, in the context of government-imposed timetables and resource agendas.

### Community networks in context

Community networks involved in urban regeneration do not operate in a vacuum; they are affected by a number of tensions in the urban policy context.

- The institutional landscape has become more *fragmented* and community networks tend themselves to be responses to this fragmentation. Yet there are also moves to greater *integration*, influenced by SRB partnerships, City Challenge Boards, regional offices and programmes with sponsor ministers. Given the need to work across so many different organisational boundaries and cultures, the practical costs of co-ordination and harmonisation are high.

- At the same time as agencies and localities are *competing* for government and European funding, the criteria for funding regimes stress *co-operation* and partnership building. Co-operative networking relationships do emerge and operate effectively, but tensions arise when these are set in a competitive environment where the partners also have to consider their individual survival.
- The influence of government and European funders exerts a *centralising* effect on regeneration policy, but at the same time there are *localising* pressures as policy and funding regimes stress the involvement of communities and approaches targeted on specific areas.
- involving participants in policy discussions concerning the pros and cons of networks, which are too often hoisted upon communities with the aim of securing a particular result;
- establishing forums or 'clearing houses' for good practice and the exchange of experience, in order to facilitate learning between networks.

Developing sustained urban regeneration and new forms of community governance depends not simply on the creation of networks but on how those networks are supported and maintained over future years. Action on two key issues is required: widening involvement and strengthening resourcing. The researchers conclude that the following measures would be helpful:

### Strengthening community networks

Community regeneration networks rest heavily on the motivation and skills of key individuals. Honest, committed, energetic, trustworthy, open, friendly, charismatic - these were the words used by network participants to describe the qualities they look for in others. A group of individuals who can work together will enable a network to flourish. Conversely, personal tensions and dislikes, or the departure of key individuals can hinder or even stop the network from functioning.

Beyond the individual level, two key factors underpin the development of community networks:

- *the opportunity to network* - through social events, conferences or seminars and
- *the capacity to engage* in terms of time, organisational support and resources.

Small or marginalised organisations are at a particular disadvantage, but networking is a constant balancing act for all participants - between the possible costs of involvement against uncertain longer-term gain, and between an organisation's own interest and those of the wider community.

Agencies can strengthen the opportunity and capacity to network through:

- providing skill development and resource back-up for key network roles (leadership and facilitation, mutual support and information exchange, translating ideas into action);
- creating an ethical stance in favour of 'good governance' through networks, based upon values of openness, pluralism, democracy and altruism;
- using electronic information systems like cable, Internet and e-mail.

The process of joining a network is not simply a matter of personal choice. Once established, networks develop their own rules and norms which may be more or less inclusive. Those involved in leadership activities within networks can act to minimise barriers to participation by:

- taking positive steps to wider access by considering the timing and location of events and by empowering 'link-people' to connect the core network into wider groupings;

- 'Urban Regeneration Panels' should be established by government at the regional level and composed of community, voluntary, business and statutory sector members. Their role would be to identify the impact of current regeneration policies as they affect different groups and localities. They could also comment on proposals for new policy initiatives.
- Government and other agencies introducing urban regeneration initiatives that require networks to be activated or established should ensure that sufficient lead-time is allowed. The time demands of networking on individuals from community bodies and small voluntary sector and business organisations can hamper participation and lead to 'network fatigue' among key individuals.
- The assessment, monitoring and evaluation of urban regeneration initiatives requires qualitative as well as quantitative performance indicators. The current emphasis by central government on monitoring specific and quantifiable objectives encourages a narrow view of regeneration and one that underplays the possibilities for increased involvement by the community in its own governance. Community development and 'capacity building' is a longer-term process and hence requires a different kind of indicator from those generally included in regeneration strategies. It makes sense for partnerships to develop some 'bespoke' indicators within the locality to ensure relevance and a sense of ownership.
- Government should make resources available to potential network participants through two types of grant. A 'Network Support Grant' would contribute towards the costs of networking borne by participants from smaller organisations. A 'Network Development Grant' would encourage intermediate and statutory bodies to produce schemes to facilitate the participation of smaller voluntary and community organisations and small businesses in urban regeneration networks.
- Providers of support and training for urban regeneration networks should ensure that there is a focus on review and development. This should enable networks to establish the effectiveness of their ways of working, to identify and seek to resolve any blockages, to establish ground rules for

the future and to review the ethical base upon which members operate.

- Information technology should be used to facilitate the exchange of ideas and information between local, regional, national and European urban regeneration networks. Ensuring community access to IT networks is essential in order to help overcome the effects of marginalisation and exclusion.

### Networking as a model for local governance

At one level, networks are symptomatic of a political malaise, where unrepresentative groupings fill the 'democratic deficit' in local politics. At another level, networks can be seen as complementary to formal democratic processes, providing a means by which those excluded from or marginalised by formal systems can make an input and apply some influence. Networks can counter-balance entrenched interests and the limitations of representative democracy, allowing single issue campaigners and community groups a direct voice.

Networks face the problem of ensuring that a number of views are heard and that those involved and affected regard decisions as legitimate. Increasing the formality of the network by turning it into a partnership is one method of increasing the level of representation because it clarifies who is included as a member.

Community networks in urban regeneration face the challenge of working across the cultural boundaries of the different sectors involved and of seeking to include those traditionally marginalised in policy-making - women, black groups and working-class communities generally.

Internally, networks need to develop a language which is accessible to all and ground rules for decision-making and resolving any conflicts. Externally, they need to establish links with both the formal democratic system, and with networks and partnerships at different scales - the local, regional, central government and European levels.

Networking in urban regeneration raises wider questions about changing forms of governance and the implications of a shift of power from elected to non-elected bodies. Participants in community networks are engaged in two processes - the particular urban regeneration initiative itself and the longer-term process of developing new forms of governance drawing on the benefits of networking.

### About the study

The project focused on three contrasting metropolitan districts: individual interviews were held with 60 representatives from statutory, voluntary, community and private bodies at the local, regional and national level; three people in each district kept diaries recording network activity within and between agencies for one week each month over a four-month period; workshops were provided in each of the three sites at the mid-point of the research; focus groups were used to develop case study materials.

### Further information

The full report - *Community networks in urban regeneration: 'It all depends who you know'* by Chris Skelcher, Angus McCabe and Vivien Lowndes with Philip Nanton - is published by The Policy Press in association with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. (price £11.95, ISBN 1 86134 024 9).

### Related *Findings*

The following *Housing Findings* look at related issues:

- 107** Multi-agency working on difficult-to-manage estates (Feb 94)
- 132** Tenant involvement in estate regeneration (Nov 94)
- 150** Using consultancy methods with community organisations (Jul 95)
- 151** Progress and polarisation on twenty council estates (Jul 95)
- 167** Community involvement in estate regeneration partnerships (Feb 96)

The following *Housing Summaries* are also relevant:

- 7** Creating sustainable neighbourhood and estate regeneration (Apr 95)
- 10** The effect of community regeneration organisations on neighbourhood regeneration (Oct 95)
- 11** Lessons from Bell Farm Estate, York (Nov 95)
- 12** Unleashing the potential: bringing residents to the centre of regeneration (Dec 95)

For further details of these and other *Findings*, please contact Sally Corrie on 01904 654328 (direct line/answerphone for publications queries only).



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