

Partnership working in rural regeneration

Partnership working is an increasingly important vehicle for the implementation of rural development policy. However, little is known about how partnerships work in practice. Research at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, is studying partnerships active in rural regeneration to explore how the effectiveness of partnership working may be improved. Key preliminary findings are:

- f** The time required for establishing trustworthy relationships between partners and good working practices needs to be acknowledged in the lead-in time for partnership formation and length of funding under regeneration programmes.
- f** Stability of administrative support and resources is needed throughout the lifetime of partnerships to ensure effective operation.
- f** The ability of representatives from the public, private and voluntary sectors to contribute equally to partnership working needs to be developed through training for all participants.
- f** The dominance of small and medium enterprises and the dispersed nature of the community create particular challenges for rural partnerships in involving the private sector and communities.
- f** There is geographical variation in the location, number and effectiveness of partnerships. In areas which are 'partnership poor', direct intervention by development agencies may be necessary.
- f** Partnership working needs to be considered in the context of wider regeneration strategies, with attention paid to how sustainable regeneration is maintained beyond the lifetime of partnership funding.

Background

Partnership working has become established as a significant vehicle for the implementation of rural development policy in Britain. Policy developments at European, national and regional levels reinforce this emphasis. Partnerships involving the public, private and voluntary sectors are expected to allow the voices of local communities to be heard and to foster a sense of shared objectives.

Relatively little, however, is known about how partnerships work and how their effectiveness may be improved. Effective partnership working can disperse financial input and increase participation by a range of people and organisations, but less effective partnership working can incur costs – through extra administration; through difficulties in resolving problems between partners; and through a failure to develop sustainable regeneration projects.

'Partnerships' tend to be treated as a single concept in policy documents, but they vary considerably in their size, structure, territorial scope, objectives and working culture. Partnership organisations may themselves be partners in other partnerships, contributing to a complex web of relationships. They may be formed:

- as a *forum for strategic discussion, representation or consensual planning*
- to *pool resources for efficient delivery of services or implementation of projects*
- in response to the requirements of regeneration programmes, in order *to bid for funding* for identified objectives
- at a local level to create a *proactive network* around a specific project or social group

Effective partnership working

Policy rhetoric suggests many advantages to partnership working. However, the organisations involved in rural regeneration partnerships studied for this research recognise the following benefits: increased accountability and inclusivity, and hence legitimacy; the cross-fertilisation of ideas; and enhanced levels of co-ordination and co-operation between agencies.

The findings of this project suggests that key requirements for effective partnership working are:

An adequate lead-in time

The lead-in time for preparing bids to programmes, and partnership initiation, is frequently too short to enable appropriate structures and sustainable relationships to be constructed. Time needs to be allowed for the enrolling of appropriate partners and for setting rules of engagement and involvement. This 'establishment phase' is particularly crucial as partnerships tend to be fairly stable once set up. Very few lose partners after formation, and new partners tend only to be recruited as a consequence of external

organisational changes or in order to bid for new sources of funding.

Time, resources and training for community involvement

Time is also critical in structuring and undertaking consultation with local communities. Many partnerships feel that more time is needed for local consultation before the structure and programme of the partnership is confirmed. Time and resources may also need to be devoted to developing the capacity of communities to participate effectively in partnership working:

"You look at each community differently...many are not yet into the mode of helping themselves. They still expect money to be pumped into their community or expect the agencies to come in and do everything. They are not into the self-help mode as of yet."

"We are facilitators...working with the local community and building their capacity up, and [helping] communities to enter into partnerships...[and helping] to ensure that their voices are heard."

Representatives from voluntary or community sector partners without previous experience of partnership working can find themselves unable to contribute on the same level as other partners. For example, one partnership co-ordinator commented:

"When we started there was a very strong tendency for the statutory people to be talking to each other, and others, such as the parish councillors, had no idea as to what the hell was going on and what they were talking about."

Recognition of different partners' cultures

Partnership working requires particular skills and modes of operation. Private sector representatives are often frustrated by the different culture. Levels of bureaucracy and paperwork are higher, and longer time-scales exist for decision-making and action than in the private sector:

"The culture of working is very different...our private sector still can't believe how you can make anything work in this way. They can't believe the time everything takes and the piles of paperwork."

Time and resources to build trust

Trust needs to be built between partners, and clear administrative procedures need to be developed. Prejudices between partners can create obstacles to effective co-operation until the expertise of each partner is proved. Time is required to develop good working relations and collaborative processes. One co-ordinator reflected:

"It would be just much more streamlined and straightforward if we didn't have to work in partnership. We could just go ahead and do something without having to consult...Partnership working takes time. Absolutely."

These obstacles can be overcome through training and experience, but the process takes time and resources.

Stable programmes of adequate duration

Where partnerships are funded under limited-life programmes, they can find that developing effective partnership working consumes a considerable proportion of available time. As a partnership co-ordinator argued, realising the benefits of partnership projects may need longer than typical programmes allow:

"I don't think that three or four years is a very long time. All the literature says seven or ten years."

Partnerships' ability to meet their delivery targets can hence be compromised. This can create inequality between partnerships in the same programme. Those developed from pre-existing organisations or in a second or later round of funding are more able to focus effectively on regeneration objectives. Another programme co-ordinator commented:

"[partnerships] which had formed a group prior to the initiative...have now moved forwards to establish themselves as companies...groups which set themselves up directly for the initiative have not moved as quickly, or not at all in some cases."

Challenges to partnership working in rural areas

Very few partnerships emerge organically from the grassroots. The majority are initiated at a higher level by statutory organisations or in response to competitive funding programmes.

Governmental agencies therefore often have the most influence on the rules of partnership working. Lead funders can determine the types of partners to be enrolled, the life-span, scope, competence and territorial scale of partnerships and their working practices, reporting and evaluation procedures. These 'rules' may reflect experiences garnered in an urban context. However, there are particular challenges in rural areas for the involvement of the community and the private and public sectors:

Involving rural communities

Community engagement in partnerships is frequently restricted. In the partnerships examined, councillors, community associations, or groups such as chambers of commerce and young farmers' clubs usually represent the community. These may reflect selection by partnership co-ordinators rather than a choice of representatives by local residents. Direct input from

communities, for example through surveys or public meetings, is often restricted to the identification of needs and discussion of possible solutions. This raises questions about the accountability of partnerships and their success in community capacity-building.

Restricted private sector involvement

Conventional wisdom holds that partnerships enable private sector finance and expertise to be incorporated into economic development. However, only a minority of partnerships in the areas studied (Mid Wales and rural Shropshire) include private sector partners, and even fewer receive private sector finance. This reflects the dominance of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in the indigenous rural private sector. SMEs have neither the surplus capital to invest in partnerships, nor the surplus personnel or office-space for secondment. Membership of partnerships may equally be regarded as a costly distraction without obvious returns:

"[it is] difficult to get the private sector involved in projects which have more of a social focus. They want to see some direct benefit back to themselves [and] with a lot of projects they cannot see any benefits from being involved so they don't bother."

Although local enterprises do often contribute in kind to community-based partnerships, at a wider territorial scale the only enterprises with the size and profit margins to allow effective participation in partnerships are frequently the privatised utility companies. More usually, the employer sector is represented by public sector institutions such as colleges and hospitals. Business interests are represented by chambers of commerce and farming unions, or through Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs).

Public sector involvement

Partnership working in rural regeneration is heavily dominated by public sector agencies. Development agencies and local authorities play a significant role in providing office space and/or administrative support for partnerships. TECs also second staff to work for partnerships. From this perspective, partnership working has not, as claimed, involved a dispersal of state responsibilities, but rather has produced a new way of discharging public sector responsibilities.

Geographical variability

Differences in local authority responses and the experience of partnerships in a particular area result in geographic variability in local authority responses and in the level of experience available.

• Local authority responses

The dominance of the public sector means that the development of effective partnership working is heavily dependent on the attitude of statutory

agencies. The extent of this dominance varies depending on local political cultures and interests:

"You find that X Council, even though it is a partner within the group, doesn't fund the group to anywhere near the extent that Y Council funds their group."

Councils with a positive attitude to partnership working have a stronger involvement with inter-county partnerships and play a more proactive role in initiating and encouraging partnership formation within their locality.

- **Experience of partnership**

Areas where established partnerships have successfully encouraged communities to become proactively involved in regeneration generate more applications to funding programmes and have the advantage of experience and stable structures in bidding for new sources of funding. One project co-ordinator noted that:

"The chances of us [receiving the next round of funding] are pretty good. Strong partnerships are essential and I feel that we have these."

A requirement for partnerships to be formed as a condition of funding can mean that regeneration money is not necessarily directed to areas of greatest need:

"In contrast to a lot of other programmes which are perhaps under the remit of local authorities, we are not looking at 'worst' first. We are not necessarily going for the areas with greatest needs."

In combination, these factors produce an uneven geography in which some areas become 'partnership rich' and others 'partnership poor'. Hence, the promotion of partnership working combined with competitive tendering for regeneration monies has reinforced spatial inequalities in the scale of rural regeneration activities.

Conclusion

The researchers conclude that partnership working must be positioned within a wider strategy for rural regeneration. It needs to be recognised that partnerships are not always the best means of delivering rural policy objectives. Achieving effective partnership working is a time- and resource-consuming process, and partnerships also raise concerns over who benefits from their regeneration activity.

The stimulation of partnership working has been less successful in some areas than in others. Direct intervention by local government or development

agencies may be required to encourage a more widespread *capacity* for effective partnership working.

In continuing to emphasise partnerships as a key mode of delivery, rural policy needs to address the following key issues:

- There needs to be a modification of the requirements placed on partnerships by programmes and funding bodies, to ease the development of effective partnership working.
- Longer lead times are needed, to allow a workable relationship between partners to be established. Start-up funding may be required during this 'establishment phase'.
- Sufficient revenue funding should be provided throughout the lifetime of partnerships to underpin effective administration and delivery.
- Partnerships need sufficient lifetime to allow for the development of effective partnership working practices and capacity-building in communities, to ensure continued regeneration beyond the funding period. Transitional funding may be required to assist this process.
- More training is needed to allow all partners to contribute effectively, particularly voluntary sector and community partners.

About the study

These findings are based on research being undertaken by Bill Edwards, Mark Goodwin, Simon Pemberton and Michael Woods of the Institute of Geography and Earth Sciences, University of Wales, Aberystwyth, as part of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's 'Action in Rural Areas' programme. The project, which is due for completion in February 2000, is studying rural regeneration partnerships in mid Wales and Shropshire.

How to get further information

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