findings

Do policies to promote community participation in governance build social capital?

This study, by a team from Demos, examined whether promoting community participation in governance helps build social capital. Drawing on a review of the academic evidence and original research in two deprived neighbourhoods, it addresses this question and also proposes some alternative approaches. The research found:

■ The key factor influencing levels of participation in governance was the existing pattern of 'linking' social capital: those already well-connected tend to get better connected.

■ Community participation tends to be dominated by a small group of insiders who are disproportionately involved in a large number of governance activities.

■ What social capital is created by opening up governance to community involvement tends to be concentrated in the hands of this small group. There is no guarantee that the wider community feels the benefit of this social capital, because formal governance structures are often not embedded in everyday community life.

■ A number of forces create 'barriers to entry' for those not involved in governance, and increase the likelihood that those already involved will become more so. This suggests that the way governance arrangements work, rather than bad practice by particular institutions, makes this problem worse.

■ Potential participants are often put off by the experience, or the perception, of feeling excluded by the way that community participation arrangements work.

■ The researchers conclude that:

  – Pushing harder on the existing approach is unlikely to ensure stronger links between community participation in governance and social capital. An alternative is to try to make more effective connections between formal participation by a small group of insiders and the more informal, everyday social networks in which a much bigger group of citizens spends a significant part of their lives.

  – Rather than expect everyone to participate in formal governance equally, we should try to make more people's everyday civic engagement count, by designing the formal structures of governance in a way that taps into the informal, routine spaces of community life, such as the school gate, places of worship or local post office.

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Background

There is growing evidence that certain kinds of social networks enable citizens and communities to access certain resources that they can use to work together to tackle problems for themselves. Such 'social capital' is attractive to policy-makers because it holds out the possibility of improving social outcomes more effectively, through means which are both more legitimate and cheaper, than traditional public service delivery.

Policies to promote community participation in governance are concerned with a particular kind of social capital. The theory is that by involving people in the governance of services, participants build relationships with public institutions or officials that give their community access to valuable external resources like money, support or political leverage. These relationships are sometimes described as 'linking social capital'.

The researchers designed an intensive case-study process, focusing on two demographically similar wards - Ely and Careau in Cardiff, and Benchill in Wythenshawe, Manchester. They spoke to people involved in community projects in a range of different ways, drawing out the key themes affecting governance in each area. The two wards are amongst the poorest in the UK, according to the EU Indices of Deprivation. Both have high levels of economic and social deprivation and have been the target of initiatives aiming to tackle the resulting challenges.

What influences participation?

During the fieldwork, researchers identified six core influences. Although each was distinctive, they tended to work in interrelated pairs, grouped under the umbrella terms inequity, exclusivity and dependency.

Inequity
Preferential attachment
The networks surrounding participation structures in Ely and Benchill all have a few 'nodes' (e.g. people or institutions) with a very large number of connections to other nodes, and a much larger number of nodes with only a few connections. In Cardiff, for example, one interviewee sat on the committee of the tenants' and residents' association, the Communities First partnership and the patient reference panel, whilst another activist in Benchill was a governor of two schools and sat on the board of the Wythenshawe Forum and the SRB partnership.

The rich get richer
Participation confers benefits which do not necessarily 'trickle down' to non-participants. Individuals who gain 'linking social capital' through participation in governance increase their likelihood of continuing to gain more linking social capital. Participants learn about how the system really works. Above all, they learn the confidence to apply this knowledge and skill in governance settings. "Once you're on the inside you learn how things work and that you can't always get what you want," said one participant. "But the trick is to learn to compromise and fight your corner – I can still stand up for my principles."

Exclusivity
Closure
The value of linking social capital may come from preventing others from accessing it. It can suit public sector partners to work with some community representatives rather than others, and it can suit those representatives to be the community voices that public sector partners listen to in decision-making. In Benchill, for instance, a close relationship between one of its organisers and the council regeneration team made one community project aware of an opportunity to access some Learning and Skills Council money which it wouldn't otherwise have known about at the right time. "It's very much not what you know but who you know," was the project's verdict on the experience.

Self-exclusion
The study found at least three reasons why people opted out of activities in which, in theory, it served their interest to be involved. Some people simply decided that governance was not for them. In Benchill, one community worker tried being a school governor but found it was not right for him, concluding that governance doesn't really fit with his ideas about how to contribute to community life. Others found that their interests could be furthered by deliberately excluding themselves from community participation arrangements. Another resident knew that resigning from a housing association board was a sacrifice of a seat around an important table, but it also sent a symbolic gesture to the organisers. Finally, people opted out as a result of resistance; they responded to the absence of opportunities for meaningful participation by developing alternative forms of collective action that did not, in the short term at least, rely on the conventional channels.

Dependency
Community dependency
"Those who shout loudest get somewhere," said one of the interviewees. "But who is going to ring up those people who weren't at the meeting and ask them if everything is ok?" By routinely taking on a disproportionate burden of governance activities, community participants perpetuate a vicious circle which increases that burden and dampens the enthusiasm of others for alleviating it.

Institutional dependency
"There is a tendency to over-use the key people", one community activist said, explaining how institutions themselves also play a key part in fostering a culture of dependency on a small community elite. "As soon as you start going to one meeting or other the vultures come in," she said. There is often a temptation to go for the quick fix of recruiting an existing community participant who is a known quantity, rather than to invest scarce time and resources in attracting new people who may not end up participating fully or who may drop out. "Once you see someone who's half-decent you try and get them involved in other things," she continued. These problems are particularly acute for marginalised groups when there are pressures to ensure 'representativeness'.

Implications for improving practice

Building on these findings, the researchers suggest principles from which a different approach to community participation could be developed:

■ Getting governance to reflect the contribution of a much wider range of types of participation is more important than getting everyone to participate.

■ Changing the structures so they fit people's participation is likely to be more productive than changing people's participation so it fits existing structures. For example, instead of trying to corral the young people who attend a youth club or mothers in a playgroup into getting involved in governance, we should ask how governance can get involved with them. As one of the interviewees put it, "People already congregate in school, church, at the bus stop … We need to work harder to find them – don't assume if they don't turn up to meetings they're not interested."

■ We need to pay much closer attention to the incentives for participation, and these are fundamentally about the devolution of power. Participants in governance will find it much easier to mobilise others and plug into their networks if the formal structures they inhabit are places where real power lies.

■ Changing cultures of participation in the long term is likely to be more effective than inventing ever more structures of participation.

Some possible ways forward
If these principles were followed, a system that mobilised 1 per cent of citizens to participate actively would still have the potential to be both effective and legitimate. The researchers developed this principle further into a possible new approach. 'The 1% Solution' puts forward two clear objectives for policy and practice:

■ mobilise participation by 1 per cent of citizens;
■ embed this in the wider rhythms and routines of community life.

What kinds of interventions might help to realise these objectives? The seven ideas that follow illustrate how 'The 1% Solution' might work.

Backing social entrepeneurs
With more backing, social entrepreneurs could bring about local change. One way to do this might be to replace some community participation structures with Community Interest Companies, run by a social entrepreneur and with local people given representative rights as 'shareholders' rather than voters or residents.

Disconnecting and reconnecting the 1%
Whilst it may not be possible to counteract the barriers identified completely, there are almost certainly opportunities to 'disconnect' and 'reconnect' community participants and their stakeholders in new ways. More participants for governance roles could be recruited by lottery, for example, with financial support to encourage those selected to take up their position.

Building trust gradually
We need to design approaches that develop trust in the community participation process gradually as the cultures around new governance structures strengthen and become more resilient. For example, rather than being given hundreds of thousands of pounds in single chunks, New Deal for Communities partnerships and other community participation structures could be given small pots of money that then double at regular intervals. This would allow partnerships to grow in confidence and effectiveness, and to tolerate a more experimental approach to spending money.

Involving other citizens
Other citizens need to be able to trust and hold to account the participating 1 per cent. One innovation that might help would be the establishment of a distinctive process for a local right of initiative. This would allow citizens (whether individuals or in larger numbers) to set the political agenda directly by demanding a local authority or police force take action on a particular issue of concern. This is similar to the 'trigger' powers being envisaged as part of the Government's plans for neighbourhood governance, but is more ambitious in the types of responses that might be demanded. Having a right of initiative ensures that citizens can put something on an institution's agenda even if their community representatives are reluctant to do so.

Long-term capacity building for participation
Creating a local Community Governance Service to recruit, train and support participants could promote participation amongst ever greater numbers of people. Responsibility for delivering this service could be devolved to local community organisations. The long-term goal would be both to increase and to diversify the pool of people involved in governance, working with existing participants to make this happen by creating succession plans and supporting their networking in the community at large.

Making participation a national priority
If we want to see a fundamental change in attitudes to participation, it must be something we expect of all communities. In return, government could introduce a Neighbourhood Participation Entitlement, a package of funding and capacity-building support available to every neighbourhood that wants it.

Refashioning the role of local councillors
Representative roles will need to connect with and help join up those much more distributed patterns of power at the very local level. The challenge for councillors would be to recognise the responsibility to acknowledge the validity of other representatives' claims, and to embrace a new, clearer role as the champion of community engagement in their area.

About the project

The research was conducted between July 2004 and May 2005. Researchers drew on a range of data:

■ a review of relevant literature examined the academic perspective and established a clear picture of the national and local policy contexts;

■ extended case study visits incorporated a mixture of individual qualitative research interviews and informal focus group research. Research participants were identified by selecting key individuals playing particular roles within their communities, such as tenants' and residents' associations, and pursuing further leads suggested by the people within those organisations.

For more details

The full report, **Community participation: Who benefits?** by Paul Skidmore, Kirsten Bound and Hannah Lownsbrough, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

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Tel: 01904 615905, Email: info@jrf.org.uk

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