Strengthening community leaders in area regeneration

Successful regeneration projects depend on effective community involvement. This study - by Derrick Purdue, Konica Razzaque, Robin Hambleton and Murray Stewart of the University of the West of England, Bristol, and Chris Huxham and Siv Vangen of the University of Strathclyde - examines the role and impact of community leaders involved in area regeneration partnerships. The analysis suggests that bold change is needed if the rhetoric about community involvement is to be matched by good practice on the ground. The researchers found:

- The contribution of community leaders to area regeneration policy and practice is undervalued by policy makers and public service managers. Community leaders have much responsibility but little power.

- Other regeneration partners do not always trust community leaders or acknowledge that they play an equal role in partnerships.

- The personal experience of leadership is an internalised and often unshareable mixture of energy and commitment, juggling time and money, fighting off burnout, and balancing conflicting loyalties between community roots and the wider partnership. This requires community leaders to set clear limits on the demands partnerships make on their personal lives.

- The concept of a unified community within any geographical area is misleading. The representativeness and accountability of community leaders is limited by patterns of social division.

- Tensions often arise between a first generation of community leaders, recruited at speed to legitimate a regeneration bid, and a second generation, who emerge as a result of local capacity building.

- The researchers conclude that central government and local authorities can take practical steps to enhance the role of community leaders. In particular, regeneration policy could be made more 'community friendly' by reducing the bureaucratic demands of partnership working on individual community leaders, creating more flexibility in the bidding process and emphasising community-led evaluation.

Background

Community representation is widely accepted as crucial to the success of urban regeneration partnerships. Yet, there has been little research into the role of individual community leaders in area regeneration. Community leaders may be identified in two ways: those who hold leadership positions by sitting on area regeneration partnership boards and those who have a reputation of leading community action.

This study identifies five key themes which lead towards practical suggestions for enhancing community leadership in policy and practice.

The policy context of community leadership

Power does not lie in the hands of community leaders but in government policies and the structures of central and local government. Despite the shift from local government to local governance, heralded by the plethora of partnerships in recent years, many established power relationships remain undisturbed. Central government imposes tight limits on the activities of regeneration partnerships and local authorities remain a major stumbling block to empowering communities and their leaders.

This research shows that community leaders almost always have responsibility but little power. Community leaders interviewed complained that short funding deadlines led to them being asked to sign up to regeneration bids late in the day. Often this meant they had no real chance to consult with the community and gave the impression that, while their support was needed, their views were not sought after. Community leaders argued that, once the bid had been formulated and accepted, the budget was defined in broad terms. As a result there was little scope for community decision-making.

The impact of working in partnership

At first inspection, partnerships seem to be based on trust, but in reality some partners are more powerful than others and this influences the way the partnership works. Where trust is high, community leaders are able to act as champions for the partnership. Where trust is low and power retained centrally, community leaders tend to become opponents of the partnership. Intermediate levels of trust produce a pragmatic approach to the partnership as a source of money. Individual community leaders may alternate between two of

these styles in the differing contexts of partnership and community. All those involved require considerable support, such as careful induction and ongoing team-building training, if common understanding, goodwill, and trust are to be built between partners from different sectors and effective and accountable forms of community / neighbourhood governance developed.

The personal experience of leadership

Some community leaders are visionaries who make community their vocation: *"They eat and sleep community"*. Others simply respond to the demands of the partnership. Their ability to deal with members of the local community varies. The procedures and funding aspects of SRB tend to attract those with sound bureaucratic skills rather than necessarily those with strong or innovative leadership skills.

Community leaders are expected to give up vast amounts of time for no pay. Some simply cannot afford to spend this kind of time without compensation to release them from work. For those who do take up the challenge there is no career development. Without a professional background preparing them for dealing with the high levels of paperwork and conflicting demands, burnout is inevitable.

Expectations from the community can be even more demanding. Leaders are thought to be permanently available and are frequently blamed for any problems or criticised for trying to change a situation that others have come to accept. Community leaders bear heavy expectations to span the barriers between the structures and professions of government on the one hand and the socially excluded and often disgruntled local populations on the other.

The profile of a Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) scheme in the community can benefit from a project that local people can see as a tangible change in their neighbourhood, such as the building of a new community centre. Visibility can, however, also generate opposition. In areas where SRB lacks a visible focus, usually only professional project managers are interested. The public perception seems to be that regeneration meetings are boring and demand technical skills, particularly a grasp of figures. One SRB manager ran drop-in sessions in the partnership office three times a week for six months without a single inquiry.

Representation and accountability

The SRB often operates with a notion of 'communities of place', based on shared experience of neighbourhood. This creates the expectation that community leaders can represent all types of people in their area. However, all too often leaders have access only to fragmented communities of identity based on limited social networks against a background of apathy or even hostility. Connecting diverse community networks is a serious challenge, exacerbated by a lack of adequate accountability and feedback mechanisms. Community leaders are far from representative, often replicating the patterns of social exclusion. For example, young people, black and ethnic minority people, gays, lesbians and disabled people have little voice.

Leadership succession and capacity building

Partnerships involve processes of change, with new funds cascading down through the locality and generating new leaders. Partnerships, and their community partners, appear however to become set quite early on in their lives, as the initial community representatives become trusted members of the partnership. To be effective, partnerships need to bring in new community leaders as time goes on.

While the community leaders themselves are important in leading change, they must act within the rules and resources defined by regeneration policy as well as the institutional arrangements and culture of the partnership, usually strongly influenced by the local authority. Nor can they act as isolated individuals. Rather they must maintain a fluid and changing relationship with community networks that develop around issues of neighbourhood governance. Community leaders have to cope with considerable strain and need help in developing skills to cope with multiple demands.

Conclusion

The researchers conclude that if regeneration partnerships are to empower communities and their leaders, policy-makers and practitioners need to take steps at three levels:

- Make regeneration policy more 'community friendly'
- Support community leaders in partnerships
- Strengthen community leadership

Make regeneration policy more community friendly

- *Policy-makers* need to make partnerships more flexible and accessible to community control and the workload of community representatives needs to be reduced. For those already involved as community partners, the urgent priority is reducing the bureaucratic demands of partnership working, which currently lead to exhaustion and isolation from the community.

- *Policy-makers* could encourage community participation and accountability by extending the lead-in times for bids and creating greater flexibility in the bidding process so that community leaders can have a more significant role in decision-making. A shift to community-led evaluation would allow local people to establish their own criteria of success and measure progress against these, rather than complying with bureaucratic monitoring systems. Changing the rules for accounting partnership resources so as to value paid and voluntary time equally and introducing attendance fees could increase the value of the community input into the partnerships.

Support community leaders in partnerships

- *Statutory and business partners* need to recognise community leaders as equal partners, value their time and not overload them with bureaucratic tasks.

- *Leaders of local authorities* engaged in regeneration partnerships need to be less defensive when community partners raise concerns. A willingness and ability to work across departmental boundaries and share local authority expertise would be helpful to community leaders.

- *Regeneration partners* will need to devise innovative team-building approaches in order to build common understanding, goodwill, and trust between partners from different sectors, and to establish a collective partnership identity. Community partners require prompt and appropriate induction and training as well as money to meet their practical needs.

Strengthen community leadership

- *Statutory and business partners* will need to support community leaders to address limitations in

representativeness and accountability. Regular reviews of representational arrangements, providing resources for strengthening reporting back mechanisms and mediating community conflicts arising from SRB, are needed.

- *Regeneration partners from all sectors* will need to encourage new community leaders, and provide ways for capacity building to draw new leaders into the partnership. Change, conflict and leadership succession are inevitable elements of a healthy partnership. If well-managed they can be positive features of area regeneration partnerships.

- *Community leaders* themselves have to be more prepared to set limits on the personal demands they put on themselves. They need to take control of the time they spend on the partnership and be prepared to leave the partnership if it is unworkable. Encouraging new leaders to emerge and develop could help keep the partnership stay fresh and avoid overloading individuals.

About the study

The project was conducted by members of the Cities Research Centre, Faculty of the Built Environment, University of the West of England, Bristol, and the Graduate Business School, University of Strathclyde.

The study is based on research on community leaders involved in SRB schemes in nine case studies in the UK: Banbury, Bristol, Chester, Glasgow, Pontypool, Sefton, Sheffield, Tower Hamlets and Weston-Super-Mare. Eighty-eight community leaders were interviewed, including 42 women and 22 people from minority ethnic backgrounds. A subset of these took part in eight focus groups. SRB project managers and/or community workers were also consulted in each area. The authors are most grateful for the inputs made by the case study interviewees.

How to get further information

The full report, **Community leadership in area regeneration** by Derrick Purdue, Konica Razzaque, Robin Hambleton and Murray Stewart with Chris Huxham and Siv Vangen, is published for the Foundation by The Policy Press (ISBN 1 86134 249 7, price £13.95).