

## Community participants' perspectives on involvement in area regeneration programmes

A new study exploring the experiences of residents involved in urban regeneration projects suggests that there is still much to learn about involving local people in area regeneration initiatives. The study, by a team from Goldsmith's College, found:

- f** **Communities are diverse and local interests may conflict with each other. If the community is seen as homogenous then only the most powerful voices will tend to be heard.**
- f** **Residents felt there was a gap between the rhetoric that demands community participation in area regeneration programmes and the realities of work on the ground.**
- f** **The study did find examples of good practice, but residents also had major criticisms to make. Too often, in their view, the mechanisms for effective community involvement had been inadequate, with too little time for effective consultation. Many commented that there had been insufficient support and not enough training (a conclusion shared by many professionals).**
- f** **There was broad agreement between officers and local community representatives that official funding for bids should be conditional on guarantees that there are adequate resources for community involvement.**
- f** **The study piloted 'Audit Tools' for area regeneration programmes – which could be used by communities themselves. Community representatives expressed their interest in using these as part of an obligatory system of monitoring community participation.**
- f** **The researchers conclude that:**
  - **debate should focus upon the most effective forms of dialogue between different structures of governance and different community interests, rather than simply polarising distinctions between 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' approaches;**
  - **mainstream policies and resource allocation decisions need to take account of the lessons of locally based programmes and policies;**
  - **community participation should be subjected to an auditing process that echoes the monitoring of 'hard outputs' and the financial accountability of major public spending programmes.**

## Background

The study is based on community participants' own views on their experiences of participating in area regeneration programmes, drawn largely from case studies and a series of workshops bringing together community representatives.

## The case study areas

The research was based principally around four case study areas: two areas in London characterised by major property development pressures (Greenwich Waterfront and King's Cross), an area characterised by the collapse of coal mining (Barnsley) and one metropolitan area outside London (Aston in Birmingham).

The research highlighted the differences *between* the case study areas and the diversity and complexity of community interests *within* each locality.

- In Barnsley, the local political culture is dominated by the mining industry and conventional structures of local government: "In Barnsley people always used to say that the council do it *for you* and the Coal Board do it *to you*. To a large extent that mentality still prevails." The region also faces massive economic pressures. Nevertheless, major changes which attempt to enhance community participation are being brought forward; for example, the council has created innovative local Community Partnerships, autonomous companies intended to draw together local councillors and community interests.
- Regeneration programmes such as City Challenge had been the subject of considerable criticism from local residents in inner city Birmingham. As a result of determined efforts, there were examples of previously excluded minority ethnic groups gaining access to regeneration resources, however. Overall, communities had learned valuable lessons through these experiences, they felt. "Decentralisation has been working better in Aston/Newtown as a result of the experiences, knowledge and skills developed through City Challenge and subsequently via the SRB."
- In Greenwich, the model has succeeded in attracting major government funds. However, it has been less successful in reflecting the diversity of local communities: "The partnership board wants one view [to negotiate with]. It's more convenient for them to 'do business' with a unified view, whilst the reality is that there is a diversity of views."
- In King's Cross, the overwhelming significance of the parties that own key land sites in setting the

agenda for regeneration questions the expectations that can be raised in some programmes: "We have the paradoxical situation that King's Cross is awash with money, there has never been so much money in the area – build anything you like – but there isn't the money to run a service."

Both London case studies revealed a higher level of antagonism between local authorities and local communities than in either the Midlands or in South Yorkshire: "I think that there is a feeling that the money is on one side and you are on the other" (Greenwich). In both Birmingham and London the issue of race and the nature of contemporary racism provide particularly strong challenges to representative participation.

## Residents' views

Despite this diversity of background, community representatives shared a number of views on the process. Residents felt that too often regeneration agendas are set in advance of community participation. There were comments about the pressures to respond to official agendas even when these distracted community organisations' attention away from their own agendas. Groups felt that they were being defined as 'acceptable' in terms of how far their agendas coincided with council agendas and/or with private sector interests (such as property development interests). Black/minority ethnic groups were particularly concerned about this.

Residents often considered that they were being put under too much pressure, with insufficient technical support. Programmes were felt to 'make' and conversely to 'break' 'community stars': individuals and groups whose contributions were valued on some occasions and then denigrated on others, depending upon how closely they reflected official agendas:

"The local establishment see professionalisation as a good thing; they like to see individuals becoming effectively full-time unpaid community professionals ... One reason why the senior officers and members like to see the development of individual community reps into community professionals is so they can develop one-to-one relationships, so they have a single person to go to when they want to negotiate with a community. For lower officers, it's more about ... developing local people who can speak their language." Council officer

The report also echoed the conclusions of previous research demonstrating the importance of community owned structures, such as Community Development Trusts, if regeneration is to be sustainable.

Those running small programmes argued for the importance of taking account of the realities of the regional economies in which they were situated, and of feeding the lessons of small area programmes back into regional and national planning and decision-making structures. As one resident explained, the shortage of affordable housing was a key problem in the area, "but that's not an issue for some reason" in terms of wider policy discussions. "Housing," she concluded, "is off the agenda".

In terms of technical support, experiences varied greatly. There were excellent examples of training in some areas - which residents valued - but not in others. Similarly, the impact of community participation varied greatly from place to place. It was clear that over time community activists felt that they had been learning important lessons about how to be most effective in these regeneration partnerships: "People have learnt a lot over the years ... the officers have learnt too."

Both community participants and professionals emphasised the importance of resources for training and community work support being made available, right from the start. Without this, as one professional commented, many groups, including black and minority ethnic groups, "do not even realise that the [partnership] board is giving money out".

Through networking, community representatives were also sharing their understanding of how they could 'make a difference'. But, workshop participants concluded that there were few, if any, ways in which community perspectives on the lessons from one-off projects could be fed back into mainstream policies and spending programmes.

## Conclusion

Evidence from the case studies indicates that community representation has been problematic. In the workshops, participants shared local experiences and raised a number of issues about area regeneration policies and practice at regional and national as well as at local levels. They also raised questions about the relationship between small area policies and mainstream policies. The researchers also identified a number of issues which present continuing problems.

### **Recommendations for improving practice**

The researchers conclude that the following could enhance practice:

#### *Possible action by central government:*

- Provide increased time and resources to enable communities to develop their own agendas.
- Build in increased resources for participation and capacity building as part of the requirements for bidding.

One of the purposes of the study was to develop **Audit Tools**, to provide a mechanism by which communities would be enabled to evaluate the effectiveness of community participation, for themselves. Community participation needs to be evaluated with transparency and rigour. The Audit Tools provide ways of mapping the context for participation, the quality of participation structures, the capacity of partners and communities to participate, and the overall impact of their participation. Regeneration agencies need to ensure that there are effective mechanisms for auditing community participation right from the outset.

Community representatives expressed their interest in using these 'Audit Tools' as part of an obligatory system of monitoring of community participation.

- Develop a national framework for supporting learning, technical aid and training.
- Require that appropriate and effective systems for monitoring and evaluating participation be developed (including processes as well as outputs) before bids can be agreed.
- Provide resources to enable community representatives to network regionally and nationally.
- Develop structures at both regional and national levels to disseminate findings and recommendations.

#### *Possible action for government regional offices and Regional Development Agencies and partnerships:*

- Adopt a consistent approach to evaluating community participation in area regeneration programmes; the Audit Tools (see box) could be one way forward.
- Ensure that sources of technical advice, independent consultancy, community support and learning support are available to local communities.
- Ensure that there are coherent links between partnerships at neighbourhood, city and sub-regional levels.

#### *Possible action for local authorities and other agencies involved in regeneration partnerships:*

- Ensure that all bids include appropriate provision for community participation - including independent advice, support and training - and monitor and evaluate performance (again the Audit Tools provide a possible model).
- Ensure that practical support is available to enable people to participate, valuing people's time and paying for this where appropriate.

- Disseminate examples of good practice, supporting initiatives to enable communities to develop their own projects and their own community-based partnership bids.
- Take shared responsibility with Partnership Boards to ensure that the range of community views are effectively being heard, taken into account and incorporated into action and that structures are both representative and democratically accountable.
- Co-operate with requirements that the impact of area regeneration on the community sector is effectively monitored and that appropriate action is taken where necessary to ensure the strengthening of the community sector and its independent voice.
- Provide support for the community sector to facilitate participatory monitoring and evaluation and to facilitate networking at local and regional levels to share experiences and findings.
- Develop strategies to ensure that the changing role of local councillors takes account of these requirements for the community sector.

*Possible action for the community sector:*

- Share responsibility for ensuring that community participation structures are genuinely inclusive, representative and democratically accountable, taking account of minority as well as majority interests.
- Share experiences and learning within their own organisations and with organisations and groups with common interests in their areas and beyond.
- Share responsibility for participatory monitoring and evaluation, taking account of the wider impact on the community sector.
- Strengthen networks between community sector organisations locally and regionally, sharing experiences and building alliances around shared interests and concerns.

### About the study

As well as work in the case study areas, the research also involved a survey of 110 regeneration partnerships and programmes and an extensive literature review that drew on the lessons of community participation in 'third world' development programmes as well as 'first world' social welfare programmes. The literature review also took into account the reports of the Social Exclusion Unit's Policy Action Teams and the final report of the National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal. The

research in the four case study areas was as participatory as possible. Interim findings from the first rounds of interviews were fed back and discussed in focus groups. Representatives from the four case study areas then took part in a joint workshop to consider the draft report.

### How to get further information

For further information, contact the Centre for Urban and Community Research, Goldsmiths College, University of London, New Cross, London SE14 6NW: email: [cucr@gold.ac.uk](mailto:cucr@gold.ac.uk), Tel: 020 7919 7390, Fax: 020 7919 7383.

The full report, **Reflecting realities: Participants' perspectives on integrated communities and sustainable development** by Jean Anastacio, Ben Gidley, Lorraine Hart, Michael Keith, Marjorie Mayo and Ute Kowarzik, is published for the Foundation by The Policy Press (ISBN 1 86134 270 5, price £12.95).

A separate report on the Audit Tools developed for the study, **Auditing community participation: An assessment handbook** by Danny Burns and Marilyn Taylor, is also published by The Policy Press (ISBN 1 86134 271 3, price £13.95).