

Community involvement in regeneration programmes – developing effective and sustainable strategies

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- 2.10 Thanks and introduction to my own background. Easton 20 years, inc. 10 years of activity in local community projects, paid and unpaid.
- 2.12 Last few years – major opportunities opening up for community participation in various government and European sponsored programmes. Subsidiarity, partnership, sustainability, social inclusion.

Regeneration – often interpreted as economic development – enterprise, exchange, employment; schemes to create jobs and training for local people disadvantaged in the labour market. Improve, anchor money circulating within poor neighbourhoods.

Need to think more broadly than this, as the URBAN programme does, tackling quality of life in general. Many people (almost the majority in some areas, are not, and cannot be, economically active in the sense of working to earn an income. Their quality of life is affected by the level of their income, but also health, environment, social and equality issues. Are they able to exercise their democratic rights ? Do they have access to the same cultural and recreational opportunities as others ? Are they achieving their potential ? Do they feel well and safe in and around their own homes ?

- 2.15.1 Why is community participation important ? What are the benefits ? Why bother ?

Ethical grounds – only fair to involve people in decisions which are going to affect, possibly even transform, their lives.

Democratic aspects – public money, accountability, good decision-making, stakeholder contributions, strengthening civil society and active citizenship, dispersal of power away from the state and profit-driven market.

Policy and funding requirements – partnership, community-led initiatives, capacity-building, integrated approaches, monitored through QoL indicators.

Economic grounds – money circulation generates wealth, developing local markets and social enterprise, appropriate and committed inward investment, routes into education and employment. Vol. sector as employer and purchaser. Swops and savings through informal exchanges.

Social welfare – vibrant local networks and opportunities to be active in collective activities result in better physical and mental health, reduced crime and fear of crime, happier people, more effective ways of dealing with shared problems and conflicts.

Community involvement as more than consultation, whether through surveys, open meetings and the occasional open day or public exhibition. Process not an event, and it involves empowerment – enhancing local people's capacity to influence and implement decisions. This includes the users and members of

projects and groups – not just the usual suspects of paid officers or management committee members of established voluntary organisations.

Arnstein's ladder of participation. Too often regeneration managers take the easy option – shallow and short-term approach of providing information, asking for views on restricted range of pre-determined options. Followed several years later by an evaluation exercise – identifying tangible outputs, but usually overlooking the less tangible benefits of the regeneration, the improvements that matter to people living and working in the area – including that most elusive thing of all, a sense of community. This is what really underpins whether or not communities 'work' and are good places to live in.

Community involvement has to be embedded in all aspects of the regeneration programme – its design, development and delivery. For this to happen, communities need to have developed their own means for coming together to compare experiences, to pool ideas, voice concerns, set up voluntary associations and suggest ways in which issues might be tackled. This is about developing a shared identity and commitment, as well as the necessary organisational infrastructure. This is the purpose of community development. It is about developing 'community'.

'Community spirit' not a substitute for a thriving local economy with decent services and good opportunities for advancement. Nor is it a mystical or nostalgic sentiment belonging only to the 'good old days'. The 'well-connected community' is a robust, evolving web of relationships and collective organisations supporting a complex and dynamic system of individuals, groups, agencies and public institutions.

Social and political infrastructure constitutes a set of inter-locking informal networks, which has both psychological and pragmatic dimensions. It is about who talks and listens to whom, where political power lies, how decisions are made, who controls resources and how conflicts of interest are dealt with. Social capital – trust, networks, voluntary associations, mutual cooperation.

Key principles – equality and diversity. Easy to say, hard to achieve in practice. Partnership cannot guarantee this, even when community-led. People are different – different understandings, priorities, loyalties, fears and traditions. This diversity is a good thing – it deserves to be celebrated, but it is also difficult to honour, to manage as an asset which contributes to and underpins successful regeneration.

Equality is not about good intentions enshrined in policies and well-meaning statements. It is about access, rights, choices, justice and, fundamentally, respect. Challenging institutional discrimination. Social inclusion is a useful concept, but it has its limitations – does not address questions of power. Nor does it tolerate deviant behaviour which can be enriching for society as a whole, and protects the humans rights of individuals.

Social justice and sustainability require that both these issues must be incorporated into strategies for the regeneration of urban neighbourhoods. Otherwise such programmes will not 'stick' (not embedded in local aspirations or needs). Because they do not use or develop social capital. And because they stifle the initiative and innovation that can flourish when different perspectives and experiences meet.

This is why investment in community and voluntary activities is vital. Not about tidying up the independent sector or imposing structures aimed at increasing its 'capacity'. It is about reinforcing its independence and cherishing its kaleidoscopic nature, which some might argue verges on the chaotic. Mechanisms for monitoring and evaluation should be adjusted to include measures which matter to local people, e.g. per-centimeter, or Goundworks 'Prove It' framework of performance criteria. Also need to establish a baseline against which to assess progress in relation to community participation in its own right.

- 2.30 How is it achieved and sustained ? Communities have many voices and a constantly changing pattern of active citizens. Concentrating efforts on just a few people, whether you call them social entrepreneurs, community leaders, neighbourhood managers or whatever, is a v. fragile strategy – in which these hard-working, often dedicated and charismatic, individuals succumb to exhaustion, disillusionment, isolation and co-option. Community representation on partnership boards can lack continuity and accountability. As a consequence power remains with the professionals and the politicians.

Strategy for sustainable and inclusive community participation needs three strands:

- A) Developing community infrastructures – formal arrangements for communication, consultation, collaboration, such as forums, newsletters, regular inter-agency liaison; informal networks, based around local places, activities and residents' wishes. Building relationships, developing shared understanding and common purpose/identity.
 - B) Increasing capacity of all stakeholders to work in partnership – skills, systems and stereotypes. Includes institutional changes in 'how things are done', and commitment to mutual learning, joint training. Acknowledging the resources that communities bring to the table – their expertise, their experience, their enthusiasm, and their effort. Not simply seen as supplicants or beneficiaries. Partnership must be based on reciprocity and recognition of different strengths and responsibilities.
 - C) Tackling barriers to involvement – resources and positive action measures to ensure choice and access, communication and information management, organisational culture, transparent decision-making, power and prejudice.
- 2.40 Developing the 'well-connected community' – opportunities for residents to participate in activities and decision-making, boundary spanning links between agencies and different sections of the population, access to influence and resources within and beyond local organisations.

Implications for URBAN – integrated, community-led partnerships, acting as a catalyst to broad-based improvements in living standards through developing local social and economic infrastructures. Make use of the specialist roles of community workers - skills and values of community development – informal education, organisation development and promoting social integration. Long-term strategy – support for activists, professionals; and changes in the institutional arrangements that govern regeneration programmes. Doesn't amount to a revolution, but does require more power to the people who matter.