

Policy Perspectives: Citizen participation in local governance

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Global context

Over the past decade, around the world, there has been an explosion of interest in more participatory forms of governance. This has happened partly in response to demands from citizens to have more say in decisions that matter to them; but it also reflects a growing recognition, by those in power, that community involvement is central to the major challenges of revitalising democracy, improving service delivery, tackling poverty and building strong communities.

The need to address these complex issues has led to a shift in thinking from narrow ideas of **local government** to broader concepts of **community governance**, in which multiple actors play a part in public policy and the delivery of public services at neighbourhood, local government and even national levels.

In developing new forms of community or participatory governance, the challenge is twofold. On the one hand it requires empowered local communities whose citizens are able to participate in decision-making, claim their rights and hold institutions to account. And critically, it also requires government institutions and service providers to have the will and the capacity to respond to communities, to engage in more open and accountable ways and to recognise their right not only to have a voice, but also to influence the decisions that affect them.

Tackling the democratic deficit

However there is a credibility gap. In northern democracies, political participation has been declining steadily. Most people in the UK are disillusioned with the political system and feel they have little or no influence, although most think they should have. In poor areas in particular, very few even bother to vote. In parts of the global south, while people might value their right to vote, confidence in local government is undermined by political corruption, the gulf between those in power and the lives of ordinary people and the failure to tackle widespread poverty.

Responses to this problem have varied. But there is a growing consensus that the way forward is to be found in 'working both sides of the equation' – that is focusing on a more active and engaged citizenry and also on a more responsive and effective state. Citizen capacity is crucial, but effective leadership and political will as well as good institutional design are equally important. Citizens need to be able to move from being simply 'users and choosers' of public services to being 'makers and shapers' of policy, with shared power and responsibility for decision making and the allocation of resources, alongside elected members and officials.¹ This implies a huge shift in the culture and practice of local government.

Critical challenges identified by local government champions of participation:

- To change negative attitudes and behaviour towards local communities and breakdown the hostility and mutual lack of trust
- To be inclusive, ensuring the most disadvantaged communities have a voice in order to tackle social exclusion and redress power imbalances
- To recognise the legitimacy of community leaders or 'expert citizens' who can play a key role alongside democratically elected representatives
- To build trust and mutual accountability within partnership arrangements
- To recognise and navigate complexity – including the pressures on citizens to engage, and pressures on bureaucrats to deliver
- To embed participation in a way that makes it sustainable in the long-term – building relationships, finding resources, supporting innovation.

UK Context

Over the past 10 years, participation policy and practice in the UK has undergone a dramatic shift. Local government now routinely consults citizens about services and other issues and the community and voluntary sector is included in local partnership arrangements.² Since 2001, the National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal³ has pioneered ambitious renewal projects in the most deprived areas that aim to put 'communities in the driving seat'. The government has also promoted 'active citizenship', encouraging volunteering and involvement in a range of civic duties. There is now widespread recognition that citizens and communities bring valuable knowledge and expertise to the policy process and participation has become accepted good practice.

UK policy developments

Building on these developments, the government embarked on a reform agenda in 2005 that seeks to strengthen local government and

at the same time, put community empowerment at the heart of local decision-making. Recent legislation⁴ has imposed a new statutory duty on local authorities – to inform, consult and involve citizens and communities in the design, delivery and assessment of services. A detailed Action Plan for empowerment⁵ sets out the measures citizens can take to ensure they are being listened to and a revised national audit and performance management framework will check to ensure that community empowerment requirements are taken seriously.

Building on Success – Action Plan for Community Empowerment

Widening and deepening local empowerment opportunities:

- implement the new 'duty to involve'
- expand participatory budgeting – aim to be on offer everywhere by 2012
- introduce 'Community Call for Action' and use of petitions
- encourage the development of local charters
- enable more tenants to take over the management of their housing.

Underpinning and supporting this work:

- establish national and regional consortia backed by a National Empowerment Partnership of voluntary sector bodies
- develop a network of local authorities to showcase and extend good practice
- support projects seeking to transfer assets such as buildings to community organisations
- support 'community anchor organisations' at neighbourhood level.

Strengthening local representative democracy:

- strengthen the role of local councillors as champions and advocates for their communities
- broaden and strengthen the role of 'Overview and Scrutiny' committees
- improve leadership and local accountability across all public sector services.

Many people describe these reforms as a 'unique policy moment' for

1. Studies and resources on citizen participation in local governance by LogoLink. Also research material by the Development Research Centre on Citizenship, Participation and Accountability, <http://www.drc-citizenship.org>

participation and empowerment in the UK. They mark a shift away from the previous decade's focus on citizens as consumers, empowered primarily through personal choice within a public sector 'market place'. They put much greater emphasis on citizens as members of a community that is empowered, through participation in the planning and delivery processes, to set priorities, shape services and affect the quality of life and well-being in their area. The national strategy for neighbourhood renewal already pioneered models of empowerment within the poorest communities. Current policies seek to embed this approach within local government and across other public services like health and the police. The 'grand design' is to devolve power and responsibility down to community or neighbourhood level, thus increasing the potential for local solutions, greater flexibility in service delivery and better dialogue between citizens and those in positions of power.

The local government reform agenda is significant because it:

- provides statutory support for citizen engagement, making it more of a right and responsibility, rather than participation 'by invitation'
- opens up options for engagement to all neighbourhoods/communities across a local authority area
- shifts the focus of debate from the capacity of citizens to participate, to the willingness and capacity of government to support their involvement.

Challenges

If recent UK empowerment policy is to have the desired impact, there are a number of hurdles to be overcome. These issues resonate with experience in many other countries.

For locally elected members:

- The relationship between **local councillors** and the communities they represent will need to change. To maintain credibility, councillors will need to 'go deeper' into local communities, champion their priorities and use their scrutiny role to increase the transparency and

accountability of the council and other services.

- They will also need to respect the roles of **other community leaders** operating outside the political arena, thus reinforcing the importance of participatory forms of democracy.
- They will need to put something real on the table so that local people feel it is worth their while to get involved – this often means a devolved budget.

For professionals working within local government:

- The **culture of public sector decision-making** remains hard to shift. There can be resistance from professionals who feel participation slows things down and from politicians who fear they will lose power and status as elected representatives.
- The **demands from central government**, to meet targets or spend budgets to deadline, can cut across a more systematic and considered search for local solutions.
- Too often **champions of participation** within local government, who play a key role in building trust with local communities, move on to new policy initiatives leaving a gap that is not always easy to fill.

Opportunities for involvement create demands on local communities:

- Partnership working can put huge **pressures on community representatives** who may feel unsupported and not treated as equal partners.
- They are expected to deal with strategic as well as local issues, get to grips with **complex problems** and processes, and reflect the diverse views of their community to the partnership in an honest and inclusive way.
- They also need to be able to mediate between their communities and public sector organisations, somehow managing a difficult balance of **insider and outsider roles** – not easy to do, especially where community organisations are fragile, under-resourced, or locked into a 'them and us', opposition mindset.

And central government needs to find effective ways to support change:

- They need to understand that this is a complex agenda that will take time to implement – so providing a policy lead is crucial but not enough.
- There is the question of resources to support new forms of participation and empowerment. In the UK, until 2006, community and voluntary sector organizations relied on central government funding. However in line with devolved decision-making, they must now seek funding from their local partnership, persuading other partners of the value of participation and the need to invest in local communities.
- In addition to leadership, government needs to provide guidance on 'how' to make participation work and exercise leverage where local government fails to deliver reforms and communities struggle to get support.

International experience and lessons

These challenges resonate with the experience of 'champions of participation' from around the world, some of whom gathered in the UK in June 2007 to discuss these issues. At this event the participants developed a series of policy 'lessons'.

Lesson 1:

Citizen engagement is not only about getting policy right, though this is important.

It also involves paying attention to the pre-conditions for community participation from the very beginning, including:

- taking time to understand the community
- listening carefully to what people say about the issues that matter
- strengthening local capacities for engagement
- being honest and realistic about what can be done, not building false hopes.

2. Every local authority is required to have a Local Strategic Partnership that brings together key public sector agencies, the community, voluntary and private sectors, to develop joint strategies

3. National Strategy for Renewal – see: <http://www.neighbourhood.gov.uk>

4. 'Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act' October 2007

5. 'Action Plan for Community Empowerment: Building on Success' CLG Oct 2007

Lesson 2:

Citizen engagement is not just 'business as usual'.

It also requires:

- changing mindsets, overcoming resistance and challenging power relations
- finding the right champions inside and outside government and building alliances across different groups
- not underestimating the importance of small actions and mobilisation at the community level
- building strong independent civil society organisations that can exercise a strong authentic community voice and hold government to account.

Lesson 3:

Citizen engagement is not only about well-designed and inclusive processes.

It also requires strong political will and leadership including:

- the buy-in of local councillors, local authorities and other agencies
- clear communication and transparency about each participatory process
- a duty to include people who are not at the table.

Lesson 4:

Citizen engagement is not just another 'add-on' to already over-worked agencies and authorities.

It involves:

- re-examining and changing administrative processes which may not support participation
- finding resources to enable time, training and well designed processes
- addressing issues of organisational culture to enable local governments to listen and become genuine partners with communities.

Lesson 5:

'Mind the Gap'! Citizen engagement cannot be 'produced' from above or below alone.

Coordinated action is required at every level, from central to local government, and from local government to local communities by:

- creating spaces where voices can connect openly and transparently across the levels
- re-balancing power towards the local
- establishing clear minimum standards, designed through a participatory process, which can be used for public scrutiny or performance.

Lesson 6:

Citizen engagement is not a quick win, easily reduced to targets and timetables.

It must be sustained over time through:

- institutional and community-wide ownership, not only individual initiative
- a balance of immediate results and long-term commitment
- ongoing learning and improvement based on experience
- remembering previous promises and following-through on them.