RESIDENT PARTICIPATION, SOCIAL COHESION
AND SUSTAINABILITY IN COMMUNITY RENEWAL

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Abstract

This paper is based upon six case studies conducted in community renewal areas in New South Wales, Queensland and South Australia\(^1\). It identifies the way in which participation strategies are thought to contribute to social cohesion in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Specifically, the paper describes the life experiences of local people and considers the sufficiency of the ‘social capital’ thesis in the development of community renewal initiatives.

Introduction

While the notion of resident or community participation in neighbourhood renewal is not a new one, it has assumed a new prominence in the policy agenda of the Commonwealth and State Governments of Australia over the last ten years. This resurgence has been influenced by the emergence of a ‘third way’ post-socialist position (Scanlon, 2000) on the left and the continuation of a conservative emphasis on family and community on the right (Giddens, 1994; Giddens, 1998; DFACS, 2000). It is also clear that the practice of ‘community development’, that emerged in the late 1960s, has continued to influence a wide range of government and non-government services and that communities themselves have maintained their long tradition of organising around local problems (Meekosha and Mowbray, 1995). A recent review of state and federal policy documents confirms extensive support for the principle of involving local people in community and urban renewal initiatives. It also notes, however, the absence of a clear rationale for this perspective and raises questions about the extent to which this support has resulted in substantive changes in practice (Wood et al., 2002).

The paper is based upon a textual analysis of interviews and focus groups conducted in New South Wales, South Australia and Queensland in August and September 2001 as part of an AHURI funded study. Interviews were conducted with housing and community development professionals and where appropriate with any private developers that were involved. The focus groups were conducted separately with active community representatives and a randomly selected group of residents in each of the six case study areas (two in each state). This paper seeks to build upon earlier research outputs\(^2\) by describing the perceived role of participation strategies in the development of social cohesion and the lessons that might be learned from the case studies examined. Having briefly reviewed the rationale for participation in renewal the paper proceeds by reviewing in more detail the notions of social cohesion and ‘social capital’ in the context of community renewal and examining how this relates to the life experiences of the residents living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. The emerging ‘social capital’ thesis is subsequently contrasted with the longer tradition of community development and policy implications from this study are noted in conclusion.

Why Participation?

It is possible to identify two broad sets of reasons presented in support of resident participation in renewal. The first set comprises the managerial or pragmatic benefits of involving local people such as the efficiency savings that might be derived from their inclusion. The second consists of the notion that residents have a right to influence the decisions that affect them. This has been labelled the citizenship perspective. Across both of these perspectives lies the notion that participation improves social cohesion and leads to the development of more sustainable communities. These terms were used loosely by interview respondents and it was not always clear how these ideas fitted

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1 The study was conducted by the Urban Frontiers Program at the University of Western Sydney and funded by the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI).
together. Nevertheless, where social cohesion was more carefully defined it was often used in the context of crime reduction. One renewal professional claimed for example that the major objective of community renewal was:

To provide a more cohesive and responsible community where people basically police themselves rather than have [the] law enforcement agencies … taking the major responsibility.

The sustainability of renewal was also of concern across the three states. All of the programs were seen as time-limited and there was therefore a question-mark over what might happen to projects once the funding came to an end. As with similar renewal initiatives elsewhere (see Wood et al, 2002), there was concern about how the benefits that had been derived from these interventions might be maintained in the longer term. Participation was often described as an important aspect in making programs sustainable but respondents did not always explain why they believed this to be the case. It was seemingly assumed that this was self-apparent – part of the credo that was presented along with the other assumed criteria; such as the need for a greater tenure mix.

What emerges, from the study, is the notion that by encouraging residents to participate in community renewal projects they can gain the skills that are necessary to tackle ongoing problems in their community and therefore prevent the locality from slipping back into its previous un-regenerate state. The clearest description of the role of participation in the process of promoting ‘social cohesion’ and sustainability was provided by a renewal professional in South Australia:

If the local people … aren’t involved then the suburb really has not got a lot of vitality. … It’s about the quality of life of the people living there. And it’s not about other people coming in and making things happen for the people it’s about people being involved and making things happen for themselves. It’s about long-term sustainability. I mean the project is there working for a certain length of time but one actually wants … the community to be active within itself so that when the project’s work in … physical terms is done, the community is still healthy and ticking over and, … in today’s terminology, the social capital is improved and [the community] will sustain itself.

The rationale for this position was, as this extract illustrates, often couched in the rhetoric of social cohesion and ‘social capital’ but it was not clear what was meant nor how these terms related to each other. What seems to be being suggested is that through the development of participative arrangements, individuals and groups can gain the attributes that constitute ‘social capital’. Through this process they are able to gain higher levels of individual and collective agency and become less dependant in the organisation of their community affairs. This it is often implied will result in a reduction in crime and anti-social behaviour and a general improvement in the level of social cohesion in their residential neighbourhood. The confusion that arises from this type of assertion, however, relates both to the objective (what is social cohesion?) and to the means of achieving it (what is ‘social capital’).

**Social Cohesion**

Kearns and Forrest (2000) have suggested that the term ‘social cohesion’ is used in a nebulous way:

… the impression is given that everyone knows what is being referred to. The usual premise is that social cohesion is a good thing, so it is conveniently assumed that further elaboration is unnecessary.
Nevertheless, they list what they consider to be the constituent dimensions of social cohesion:

- Common values and a civic culture;
- Social order and social control;
- Social solidarity and reductions in wealth disparities;
- Social networks and social capital;
- Territorial belonging and identity.

Their account attempts to link the different domains of social cohesion and the ‘various spatial scales’ (neighbourhood, city, city-region, etc.) at which policies may be formulated but their conclusion is far from salutary:

A city can consist of socially cohesive but increasingly divided neighbourhoods. The stronger the ties which bind local communities, the greater may be the social, racial or religious conflict between them. The point is that social cohesion at the neighbourhood level is by no means unambiguously a good thing. It can be about discrimination and exclusion and about a majority imposing its will or value system on a minority … (Kearns and Forrest, 2000)

This level of confusion about the ‘ends’ is reflected in debates about the ‘means’ also. Some advocates of ‘social capital’ make a distinction between the light and the dark side of ‘the force’. Baum (1999), for example, notes that ‘some of the literature on social capital and health presents a romantic view of community and assumes that close-knit communities are necessarily healthy. However, it is possible that they can be exclusionary and distrustful of outsiders, and may not be healthy for those who are not a part of them or those within them that disagree with the majority. So what is ‘social capital’ and how does it work?

‘Social Capital’

Policy interest in the concept of ‘social capital’ in Australia appears to have been largely derived from Putman (1993) through his research on the relationship between civic tradition, democratic participation and associational activity in modern Italy. Putman, drawing on Coleman, defines social capital as ‘all those features of social organisation, such as networks, norms and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit (1993). From this perspective, membership of various voluntary and co-operative associations fosters participation and improves democratic institutions. Social capital it is maintained, facilitates co-ordination and co-operation and generates mutual benefits for participants. The corollary is that low levels of community participation or ‘civic spirit’ are associated with declining levels of trust in individuals and institutions (Hughes, Bellamy and Black, 1998).

However, as already noted, it may not necessarily be assumed that strong networks, norms and mutual trust are always entirely beneficial for individuals and their communities. As Kearns and Parkinson (2001) note, for example, residents in deprived communities often engage in a high level of mutually supportive behaviour as a response to the discrimination and social exclusion that they experience. This has been described as ‘bonding’ social capital, which enables people to ‘get by’. It is contrasted with ‘bridging’ social capital, which advocates suggest, enables people to ‘get on’ (Burns et al, 2001). Increasingly, it would appear that bonding social capital is viewed as ‘self-limiting’:

Bridging social capital can generate broader identities and recipriocity, whereas bonding social capital bolsters our narrower selves (Putnam, 2000).
This conceptualisation of ‘social capital’ has had a considerable impact upon recent debates in America and Australia and (more recently) in the UK, and social policy has been increasingly pre-occupied with a perceived decline in volunteerism, the need for social entrepreneurialism and the return of mutual aid organisations and initiatives. Key to this policy is the promotion of community intervention to tackle the perceived failure of both the market and the state (Latham, 2000).

In some senses those wishing to promote ‘social capital’ advocate participation as both a means and an end. If people become more involved with community groups and organisations then this will increase levels of trust, promote shared norms and facilitate the networking that is required to promote collective action for mutual benefits. The emphasis on engaging community involvement in aspects of the renewal process is seen therefore as a mechanism to draw people into developing the kinds of relationships and social skills that proponents of ‘social capital’ say are essential for building levels of trust and engagement. These are considered to be deficient in these kinds of areas.

Evidence from the research project suggests however that the task of promoting participation in disadvantaged neighbourhoods is not a straightforward one. The study revealed how several life experiences and other barriers had combined to effectively exclude local people from the process of renewal.

**Life Experiences**

A series of factors emerged from the fieldwork that demonstrates the difficulties involved in promoting and facilitating the participation of local people in the renewal process. In each of the three States that have been examined there had been an emphasis on participation whether motivated by a citizenship or managerial perspective and each had engaged in a wide range of activities to try to overcome these barriers. However, a series of issues were raised by residents (both active and non-active) and by renewal professionals that continue to put barriers in the way of genuine and extensive public participation.

**Stigma and Unfair Treatment**

Residents in all the case study areas felt they were stigmatised simply because they lived in an area that had been denigrated for several years. Much of this related to the ‘housing commission label’ that was attached to these neighbourhoods as the following extracts illustrate:

> In this area there is a stigma … about living in a Housing Commission house; the people that own the private houses don’t like the people that live in the Housing Commission.

> You’re low classed; you’re labelled, definitely.

The name of the estate or suburb had become a tag or form of shorthand connoting a range of negatives and while renewal work had made a difference there was still a long way to go:

> To me I think it’s going to take a while, … I try not to say I’m from [this suburb] … If I don’t want people to judge me, I don’t mention [it]. I just say [the name of the town] kind of thing

One member of a representative forum asserted that the stigma leads to discrimination in the job market and a reduction in access to finance. The erosion of mainstream services was a common theme emerging in the account of local residents across all of the case studies.
Particular mention was made of poor police response times, a poor repairs service from the housing authorities and a lack of public transport. Police responses were attributed to prejudice about the localities concerned and people generally felt that their reports were not taken seriously.

Police response [dismissive]! I live opposite the school here, and many many times you see kids running around on the roof, damaging the windows and trying to pull the air conditioning apart. Immediately, I ring the police: they come out a half hour later and the kids are gone.

The housing authorities were a common target for the random focus group participants and some community representatives. Here too, poor levels of service served to reinforce feelings of insignificance:

I have a problem with my bathroom. They dropped my ceiling they left it. One year off! One year, going to the Housing Commission about it. I told [the housing authority]. I go to them and they just put a patch in the ceiling and I have the leaking again from upstairs. I live in ground floor and I can see bubbles all over the wall. I feel like it’s going to fall on me one day.

Well yeah, I’ve to ring them three or four times just for them to come out and do something. I’ve been living in the house nearly 12 months and they don’t even listen.

Residents in four of the six case study areas also described how they felt abandoned by various private businesses. In one case residents claimed that three banks and a post office had been recently closed down and they described how a drive in movie theatre and a local swimming pool had been closed down. It was reported that the pool had been filled in with cement. Elsewhere residents described how local shops were empty and boarded up. Many of them had apparently been vandalised. In another case residents described how the bus shelters had been taken down and not replaced and also complained about a scarcity of pay phones and their general lack of maintenance.

These experiences served to lower morale and reinforce low self-esteem. Residents recognised that they often lived in areas that suffered from a range of social problems including higher than average levels of unemployment, high levels of drug usage and criminal activity, but they were irritated by the ways in which the stigma they experienced seemed to reinforce this situation. These problems, in and of themselves, were also a source of great distress.

Crime

A wide range of problems, experienced on a day-to-day basis, emerged through discussions in the focus groups and with the representative forums in all the areas. Of these, crime was highlighted in all but one of the areas. One focus group participant reported that he had been broken into three times and all but two of other twelve participants had experienced burglary while living in that neighbourhood.

Feelings of insecurity were acute in many areas. In one area a focus group participant explained how residents felt uncomfortable about allowing their children to play outside and how they felt particularly vulnerable at night:

They don’t feel safe, after the sun goes down, to go for a walk. This is true.

And for me, I’ve seen it sometimes, people get bashed in the street from teenagers or throwing things on them, burning them, snatching their bags, things like that.
One older resident explained how someone had been killed in the flats where she lived and how she felt lonely and scared.

Much of the crime was attributed to drug users or associated with drug dealing. Drug usage was described as particularly problematic on four of the six estates. The following two extracts reveal how these issues impact upon other residents and become emotionally upsetting.

The majority of people around here are good honest decent people but it’s the scumbag low-lifes that come around and they’re ripping off and they’re stealing … to support their habit or whatever.

I [have] got some neighbours that oh boy I’m [so] scared of that maybe I think I [will] have to move. They [were] fighting the whole night and screaming. I think [they were] mixed up with drugs [and] that sort of thing. It was a bit scary for a couple of months. But I have to say …. that’s the only problem I had.

Residents were particularly concerned for their children because of the number of used needles left lying around in common areas.

Poverty

Residents rarely attributed their impotence to their poverty or difficult life experiences but this view was apparent among renewal professionals. One went as far as to suggest that the lack of work opportunities for local people created a feeling of depression and dislocation. One community worker, for example, made a direct link between these feelings and a lack of enthusiasm for participation.

I think you’ve got to recognise that … you’re … undertaking a renewal project because … it’s been an area where people have gone … as a last resort. There’s high issues and people are dealing with their own personal issues, they’ve got a lot more than most people. So their interest in what’s happening out in the broader community is zip and that’s understandable, they’re just trying to get by from one day to the next. So it’s not surprising that some people are [not] interested.

Another renewal professional suggested that life experiences had created a high level of dependency:

They are used to receiving and not feeling that they’ve got any ability to influence to what happens to them.

In sum, the combined experience of poverty and the extensive use of drugs in these localities was reported to be highly stressful for residents and it was apparent that these experiences had an effect upon self-esteem and levels of morale among the local population. When asked what had discouraged them from participating in renewal initiatives common responses included ‘it won’t make any difference’, ‘your voice won’t be heard’ and ‘what’s the point in complaining?’

Other Barriers to Participation

A range of other barriers were established in the field work. At times these could be seen as a consequence of the difficult life experiences described above but on other occasions they were a consequence of poor administration on the part of the renewal agencies.
Cynicism and scepticism were reported in all case study areas and this had clearly translated into negative views about renewal initiatives. This was, in some instances, clearly wrapped up with low self-opinions but previous poor experiences of consultation had played a large part in moulding these attitudes. While both residents and professionals described high levels of apathy among local residents there were several explanations that were proffered to explain why even those residents who had been able to find the human resources necessary to engage in participation were subsequently dissuaded from participating. Reasons given include:

- the limited co-ordination of renewal projects;
- raised expectations that had not been met;
- previous poor experiences of decisions being made by authorities without their involvement.

While active residents might have felt over-consulted, residents in the random groups, in contrast, often suggested that the reason for their non-involvement was because they had simply not been asked.

Numerous accounts were also provided about the anxieties created by the invitation to participate. Participation structures placed expectations upon residents and frequently led to feelings of inadequacy. This often related to ‘language barriers’. Residents expressed anxieties about their ability to express themselves clearly in formal meetings and some had problems with basic literacy. Several people commented about the difficulties of involving people from non-English speaking backgrounds. A frequent complaint among active residents, however, was that renewal professionals failed to listen or take notice of what was being said by local people. This, in their view, was the main cause of the communication barriers. Others were upset by the levels of conflict they experienced in the community meetings. This had clearly put people off. The conflict and different perspectives sometimes related to cultural tensions and differences in value between different ethnic groups. On other occasions the tension resulted from the perception that certain community representatives were overly dominant. In contrast, however, active community representatives often felt that all the work was being left to them. Some of these sentiments also reflected a concern about the potential for recrimination either from ‘authorities’ or from other residents.

Community representatives described how many ‘would be’ participants were put off by the dominance of renewal professionals and other agency representatives in the decision-making or consultation process. This was particularly the case where key resources were at stake. Ironically, given this dominant behaviour, renewal professionals were often more concerned about the dominance of key community representatives and the representativeness of the community forums. Their concern, on the one hand, was about the extent to which representatives speak as individuals rather than putting forward the views of the community and, on the other, about the extent to which they represented the views of the whole community rather than just one particular part. There was a danger, for example, expressed by a number of renewal professionals that the focus had been on recruiting representatives from previously existing community groups and organisations. These were often already dominated by older white men and consisted of what were often referred to as the community ‘elite’.

Residents also noted practical difficulties with attending consultation meetings. Timing and location were contentious issues, particularly for those with a disability.
How Adequate is the ‘Social Capital’ Thesis?

Given the severity of the life experiences and the practical barriers to participation described in this paper it would appear pertinent to examine the adequacy of the emerging ‘social capital’ thesis. Raising this question, however, simply serves to highlight the lack of coherent definitions, the reductionism of the thesis and the lack of practical guidance about how to develop ‘social capital’.

‘Social capital’ is not apparently easy to define. Once commentators move beyond the Putnam type definition concerning ‘norms, trust and networks’, once we get past the simplistic arguments about ‘watching too much television’ and ‘bowling alone’, readers are rapidly confronted with vague references to the positive benefits of ‘interaction’ and the source of ‘social capital’ in families, communities, firms, civil society etc. (http://www.worldbank.org/poverty/scapital/sources/index.htm). In his extensive review of the concept of ‘social capital’, Fine (2001) points out how ‘even those who are using the term for the first time accept that it is difficult to define’. He suggests that the more established ‘social capitalists … are forced to compromise with the expanding scope of social capital’:

More and more variables are included, from the horizontal to the vertical, from the bonding to the bridging to the linking, from social values to networks and so on. … As a result more recent and less circumspect contributions may acknowledge the ambiguities in the definition of social capital, simply pass on, and choose or add a definition of their own to suit their own purpose. Social capital thereby becomes a sack of analytical potatoes.

Complex social problems are reduced to a simplistic deficit model with little if any acknowledgement of the significance of broader socio-economic structures, the local and national state and the use of power within civil society. Promoting participation in renewal may provide opportunity for interaction. This may, of course lead to the development of shared norms and values, but one should question the extent to which shared norms and values among the ‘network’ will overcome the historically constructed disadvantage faced by residents on marginalised public housing estates. Indeed, there is a recognition that high levels of mutual support already exists in disadvantaged neighbourhoods but, of course, this is the wrong kind of ‘social capital’. What is needed is the bridging ‘social capital’ that allows for a connection outside of the community (i.e. with those who might provide access to employment and other services). Clearly the model itself admits that ‘networks of norms and trust’ are in of themselves inadequate as it is the additional resources secured through employment that are ultimately regarded as the solution to the community’s problems. Intriguingly, however, it is ‘social capital’ that becomes the means to securing employment rather than job creation and the training of the potential workforce.

The ‘social capital’ diagnosis of malaise in disadvantaged areas is also remarkably thin on prescriptions. Its advocates appear more interested in measuring ‘social capital’ in order to claim cogency than they are in describing any developmental strategy. How is ‘social capital’ to be developed? Here, advocates move quickly to traditional community work activities and interventions – though now invariably recast as community or ‘capacity building’ and with little apparent clarity (see Box 1).
Box 1: Extract from www.communitybuilders.nsw.gov.au

**What is community capacity building?**

- Improving the abilities of communities to enhance their quality of life
- Assisting disadvantaged groups in communities to participate in these processes and obtain their fair share of the benefits

**What are these abilities?**

- Adequate living standards which encourage/allow for, a community focus
- Trust (bonding social capital)
- Effective and inclusive communication/participation/engagement measures across a community (bridging social capital)
- Presence of community controlled/responsive local organisations and community facilities
- Adequate and appropriate level and mixture of skills across different segments of the community
- Preparedness to engage with government and other external to community stakeholders
- Shared commitment and an entrepreneurial spirit to improve well-being
- Resilience and flexibility to deal with conflict and change
- Sustainability of shared commitments, networks, and outcomes

Source: Presentation notes by Gary Moore, NSW Premier’s Department, for NSW Health Promotion Director’s Forum, 19 Feb 2002

There is a general failure across this community building material to provide practical guidance about what is required. Where activities and interventions are itemised they are reduced to mundane aspects of community organising; such as the promotion of volunteering, conducting community needs and skills audits, fundraising, organisational development, and so forth. Practices that community groups have engaged in from time immemorial without the need for ‘social capital’ to explain or justify their action. In fact, there is little evidence to suggest that the ‘social capital’ thesis has contributed anything more to our understanding of poverty and social exclusion in disadvantaged areas nor to strategies aimed at overcoming them than was already present in pre-existing theory and practice of community development. On the contrary, it could be argued that it has weakened this tradition.

**Community Development**

There is a long tradition of community development in Australia going back to the Australian Assistance Plan of the early 1970s (Kenny, 1999). It is a rich tradition with a international literature (Craig and Mayo, 1995; Ife, 1995; Popple, 1995; Kenny, 1999). Unlike the social capital thesis, community development – among other things – acknowledges social and economic structural factors in society and engages with issues of power and the relative powerlessness of marginalised groups (Henderson and Salmon, 1998). Consequently, community development at a local level is informed by an appreciation of the power dimension which appears absent from the social capital thesis. Some of this tradition has remained in recent practice.

Interview respondents who were engaged in community work were asked to describe further the nature of their input and to describe the skills and training that they thought were necessary. The actual process adopted was described by one renewal professional as a developmental process. Starting with the needs identified by the community the worker in effect facilitated a ‘question and answer’ educational process that encouraged residents to explore their situation further and in the process identify potential action outcomes. As he described it:
Like, with our tenant groups for instance … What I’ve said to them is what do you want to do? ‘Well we want to develop our membership, we want to develop them to get jobs, we want to maybe have new innovative employment schemes’. But what are you going to do about it? How are you going to achieve it? ‘Well we have to upgrade our skills’. There you go! How do you upgrade your skills? ‘I would like to just investigate the possibility of doing a TAFE course maybe and getting a piece of paper that enables us to continue on and further develop the community’. It’s a very long-term process but it can snowball after a while.

This description begins to reflect the form of ‘dialogical pedagogy’ advocated by Paulo Freire (1970) which has been extremely influential in the emergence of community development practice both in Australia and across the globe (Society of St Vincent de Paul, 1998; Hope et al, 1984; Kirkwood and Kirkwood, 1989). It is apparent, however, that there was only a limited critical understanding of the role of community development as expounded in the literature (Ife, 1995 and Kenny, 1999). Notably there was a danger of emphasising representational roles such as obtaining resources and advocacy at the expense of facilitative and educational roles. It was common in the fieldwork to hear those with a community development role described as ‘the go between’ or as a source of information, rather than as a facilitator of individual and group development.

She’s in touch with a lot of organisations and resources and she keeps us informed with what’s going on, sometimes well she’s planned a lot of meetings for us to attend and get more information, or give information, so I suppose keeping us in touch with what’s going on.

He knows the right people and when we have a problem she knows who to talk to in the [housing authority].

Ife (1995) cautions against this role describing them as “problematic for a community worker who is committed to genuine self-reliance and empowerment”.

Respondents also described a range of skills and knowledge that they felt a good community development worker required. This included a range of investigative, analytical and networking skills through to inter-personal and communication skills. Again, however, there was a danger that research and information finding was perceived as the exclusive role of the community worker:

Knows where to find information when we need it

It is the ability to actually be able to analyse what’s happened in the past and develop an understanding as to why the suburb developed the way it has developed in its social fabric.

This might be contrasted with a ‘co-investigative’ approach where community groups are seen as an integral part of the research and information gathering process (Kirkwood and Kirkwood, 1989).

This demonstrates the way in which the contemporary practice of community work has lost sight of the tradition of community development and a more informed appreciation of the empowerment process: something that might arguably be attributed to the vagaries of notions such as ‘social capital’ and capacity building. Even if power is re-cast, as is now increasingly common, as a zero sum game (suggesting that gaining power is not contingent upon a loss of power elsewhere), it is still necessary to equip the marginalised with the skills and attributes that they require to challenge the powerful. These skills and attributes move well beyond nebulous notions of ‘networks, norms and trust’ – they involve the identification of problems, understanding the source and nature of the problems, developing action strategies, acquiring the skills to implement those strategies (through marshalling ideas, arguments and action) in an organised way, so as to achieve desired outcomes.
Contemporary capacity building material does not appear to address these issues it even fails to match in any manner guides to taking community action produced as long ago as 1975. The NCOSS Community Action Book published in that year, for example, provides detailed information on: lobbying, negotiating, taking direct action, using the media, finding and using information, writing for effect, etc. (NCOSS, 1975). Aspects of community organising rarely apparent in current ‘community building’ material.

This is not to suggest, however, that good community development can be reduced to a set of pre-determined skills. Study respondents, for example, suggested that successful interventions involved more than the application of a set of skills, rather, there was a need for particular personality traits, clear values and a high level of commitment. In particular, the manner in which workers operated with the community was emphasised. It was stressed for example that workers should be ‘in touch’ with the needs of the people and avoid patronising them. Essentially this meant working in such a way that shows respect for local residents – ‘working with them, not for them or directing them’. One respondent also emphasised the need for creativity and innovation in exploring the way in which things could be achieved. Others stressed the need for a clear value base:

It’s … basically come from a social justice value base, if you don’t have that value base then I don’t think you’d be able to handle community development work … because you need the empathy to be able to go out and help or do your best in assisting those kind of people.

The need for a clear value base is also stressed within the literature where the subject has been covered extensively (Kenny, 1999; Henderson and Thomas, 1987 and Thomas, 1983). For Kenny the key value is that ‘people should take control of and responsibility for their own resources’ but this is placed within a structural analysis of social problems:

[C]ommunity development theory locates the cause of disadvantage in the entrenched and systemic inequalities of our social system, whereby gender, class race and ethnicity are key determinants of one’s life chances (Kenny, 1999).

While it recognises the structural source to many of the problems, it does not however, spurn local action. On the contrary, from this perspective, local community development is committed to tackling issues of powerlessness. It has a firm commitment to promoting participatory structures and therefore developing a radical view of citizenship. This means engaging in local action to overcome discrimination and inequality. Ideas such as empowerment and self-determination are central to this position as is the commitment to diversity and respect for all (Kenny, 1999).

Policy Implications - Towards Good Practice

Community development practices emerged from the fieldwork as the most important means of promoting participation. The terms connector, promoter and facilitator were used to indicate the way in which this intervention was intended to promote the development of individuals and groups as a means of enabling them to have more control over their collective situation. There was a danger, in some accounts of the process, that educational and facilitative roles were being undermined by an emphasis on a ‘go between’ role. This may be problematic for those committed to genuine self-reliance and empowerment.

Certain community development principles emerged from the study and may be regarded as crucial to the active engagement of local residents in the renewal process.
Starting with the people.

There was a high level of unanimity about the importance of involving local people from the outset, before any significant action had been taken. This means staring with the issues that are of concern to them. Some concern was expressed about the practice of starting with existing community group representatives. Renewal professionals on occasions doubted the extent to which they truly represented the views of the wider community. While guidance often encourages agencies to go beyond local activists, it is also possible to identify and work with the most representative and open groups: facilitating and encouraging democratic practices and the widest possible involvement of local residents (Chanan, 1997).

While the tendency across the case study areas was to seek community representatives from previously existing voluntary and community groups, there was an awareness that these groups potentially failed to represent certain ethnic and religious groups and young people. It is clearly important that specific efforts are made to include minority ethnic groups in renewal programs.

While starting with the issues identified by the people was considered essential for involving people in the first place, ‘getting things done’ was described as the most important way of keeping them involved and preventing the development of scepticism.

Local Resources

A common theme emerging across the case studies was the importance of locally based resources. Local community centres and neighbourhood houses in particular were singled out as an important aspect of resourcing community involvement. In a similar vein, it was suggested that renewal professionals needed to be seen locally.

The need for training throughout the participation process was clearly expressed by community representatives and renewal professionals. There was some evidence that community activists felt inadequate and unprepared for their role, and that while training opportunities had become available, this had often been too late.

Amenable Structures

Efforts clearly need to be made to ensure that the structures and processes that they adopt are more amenable to local people. While training can be provided to enable residents to participate in conventional frameworks there are dangers that this simply leads to their co-option and an alternative approach is to adopt structures and processes that facilitate wider involvement in decision making. A key part of this and something highlighted in the fieldwork is the use of small group techniques.

Evidence from the study and from experience elsewhere suggests that giving residents a choice over their level of involvement, with opportunities for devolved power and decision making, is essential if residents are to be persuaded to participate.

While structures and processes can have a significant effect on levels of involvement it is clear it cannot in itself compensate for a failure to act on the views expressed by local people. Many community representatives questioned the actual level of influence that they had had and it was therefore clear that even where the influence had been limited or gained as a result of a long struggle this ‘getting results’ was highly encouraging to the participants.
Change in Culture

Traditionally bureaucratic processes have not been particularly amenable to participation and many bureaucrats are unused to the notion of involving ‘clients’ in the decision making process. If government departments are to be successful in creating more congenial structures and processes then it is clear that a cultural change needs to occur within these organisations. This requires careful management. In all three states there were accounts of resistance emanating from longer serving staff members and it was recognised that it would take time to change traditional ‘command and control’ cultures.

Need for Monitoring and Evaluation

It is generally recognised that the community, as the indented beneficiaries of renewal, should have a role in the monitoring and evaluation of renewal. This was not an aspect of participation that was highlighted during the study. While the representative forums established in each state allowed for ongoing feedback there appeared to be no formal mechanism which allowed residents the opportunity to comment on the success or otherwise of initiatives.

Time and Resources

Good participation needs to be nurtured. It needs time to develop and it needs to be adequately resourced. The need for local facilities, accessible community development support and training have already been highlighted but these should not be seen as quick-fixes. A long-term commitment is required to overcoming social problems and empower local people in these localities. This means ensuring that the process is adequately resourced. While, the cases studied displayed high levels of creativity and imagination, it was often recognised that these interventions had only gone so far.

Conclusion

Findings from this recent study suggest that the social capital thesis has been a major distraction from the practice of community development which is necessary to promote community participation and create opportunities for empowerment in disadvantaged localities. Community development emerges as the most significant factor in promoting and developing community involvement in renewal. The process of empowerment that is central to this intervention is a necessary requirement for tackling the barriers posed by previous life experiences. The good practice, highlighted here, stresses the need to start with the views of local people. This can be achieved by strengthening and resourcing existing groups and working for the inclusion of excluded groups.

Community participation is not an easy option. Skilled and experienced workers need to be employed to facilitate a process that might take several years to develop. Local facilities need to be made available to community groups and they require financial, training and community development support. Ideally local people should ultimately be employed in community development roles and this should be the objective at the outset.

Fairly grandiose claims have been made for resident participation. For some, it is the ultimate solution to the social problems that are manifest in disadvantaged localities. While participation itself is unlikely to overcome the multiple causes of these problems it emerges as a central aspect of the process of empowerment. Arguably, developing a critical understanding of the problems in a disadvantaged locality leads simultaneously to the development of the individual and collective agency which is necessary for challenging and changing the problems that they face.
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