

**What are the vital ingredients
required for local people to come
together and make positive
social change?**

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August 2017



Abstract

These findings explore the research for best practice within local and central government, third sector and community groups to help encourage citizens to participate in their communities. But also, what must be provided for citizens themselves in terms of education and access to resources like technologies that enable communication and learning. This research suggests that issues of deprivation, empowerment and access to information technology should be primary concerns when thinking of the necessary factors for all citizens to participate in their communities.

Keywords

Community, Empowerment, Social Capital, Inclusion, Co-production, Social Change

Key Points

- Local communities are better mobilised around specific projects
- Co-production between organisations, be it third sector or governmental, and community members is essential
- Agency led initiatives can act as catalyst for greater community involvement
- Access to information and communication technologies facilitates participation
- Importance of quick wins and feeling of inclusion and influence
- Better education and income levels support higher levels of participation

Background

The idea of community participation came into prominence in the UK with the rise of New Labour in 1997, with key concepts of community organising and community empowering and a switch from government to governance (Packham, 2008. Taylor, 2007). Since then, community participation and empowerment has continued to be of importance, with a renewed call to arms in the coalition government of 2010 (Mayo et al (eds) 2013). Initiatives like the 'Local Strategic Partnership' was an

attempt to knit together public, private and voluntary organisations, at the local level, with the aim amongst others, of better serving and involving the local community (Local Strategic Partnerships Government Guidance Summary).

The international learning event report from 'Champions of Participation: Energizing Citizens in Local Governance' (2007) point out that in the UK as well as internationally there exists a 'crisis of legitimacy'. Citizens are increasingly distrustful of central government and feel

that 'special interests' rather than the interests of the people are being served above themselves.

These background conditions have given rise to many local initiatives where the goal is to increase community participation in a wide variety of projects and objectives from budget decisions to renewable energy initiatives, sometimes grass roots movements and sometimes led by central or local governments. The next section will summarise the available literature on the effectiveness of these types of initiatives in increasing community participation as well as looking at the key points of more general research and literature.

Findings

The Scottish Community Development Centre put together several case studies in 2013 regarding community engagement, specifically in the context of community safety. Commissioned by the Community Safety Unit of the Scottish Government (Case Studies in Community Engagement Within the Context of Community Safety: Project Analysis Report 2013). Its broad aim was to 'support further learning across community safety initiatives in Scotland'. Many of the key learning points from the research were what specific initiatives and methods were more successful in engaging the community. Out of their eight diverse case studies, ranging from a Participatory Budgeting pilot in Overton in South Lanarkshire to an initiative in Clackmannanshire to regenerate Delph Pond and tackle anti-social behaviour, they noted that when initiatives that start off as 'agency led' (that is groups like local government organisations or charity groups), they can act as a catalyst for

greater community participation. Existing community infrastructure in the form of a network of groups like these was noted as an important factor of community engagement in the case studies where this already existed. There was also evidence of the impact of 'co production'. Where community members and official bodies work together in partnership there is a sense of inclusivity and being heard that encourages citizen participation. And lastly, the research noted that 'quick wins' are important when encouraging participation. They found that this communicates progress and a sense of being listened to amongst community members, and builds trust between official organisations and citizens.

These findings have been echoed in wider research both nationally and internationally. For example, 'Here People Decide: New Forms of Participation in the City' by The International Centre for Participation Studies (2008) looks at studies in the UK and abroad, they note that when community members feel involved in specific initiatives and goals that are manageable and tangible, and they feel that their involvement is going to make a difference, they are far more likely to participate, as highlighted particularly well in the case study of budget planning in Keighley (page 41).

'Champions of Participation: Engaging Citizens in Local Government' was an international learning event in 2007 that brought together community leaders and government officials from across the world to share best practice in engaging citizens in social change. The report strongly echoes the findings mentioned above and also notes that support of citizens by local government and official organisations is crucial, recognising that participation

by citizens in community affairs can be extremely taxing. Therefore, citizens showing an interest must be nurtured, supporting the Scottish Community Development Centre's findings on the benefits of co-production. There is also a general theme of the importance of a sense of empowerment from feeling involved and listened to that is essential in creating and sustaining community participation.

There are also numerous publications aimed at community workers and students on the professional practice of engaging community members. This literature also stresses the importance of a civic and civil relationship. For example, Carol Packman in 'Active Citizenship and community learning' argues that community organised initiatives are organised by the community and therefore for the good of the community, but lack the resources and influence of official organisations like local government organisations. However - the reverse - initiatives organised by official bodies often do not ensure full community participation but do have the influence and resources to affect change. Therefore, a strong relationship between the two based on mutual supports is essential for the best of both worlds.

Exploring community participation in the context of advantaged and disadvantaged communities shows us another angle. 'Social capital' has been thought of as 'the web of cooperative action that facilitates resolution of collective action, problems and those features of social structure, such as interpersonal trust, norms of reciprocity and mutual aid, that act as resources for such collective action' (Veenstra quoted in Dutta-Bergman 2005). Good

social capital is comprised of trust, civic engagement and life satisfaction (Dutta-Bergman, 2005), and Putman (2000) argues that the better the social factors are like education, income and employment, the greater the social capital, leading to greater community participation. Dutta-Bergman (2005) explores this in the context of the digital divide in America, asking whether public internet access, which is strongly associated with higher socioeconomic status and therefore social capital affects community participation. He found that community participation was higher in areas with public access to the internet. The links between these three factors, social capital, socioeconomic status and internet access suggest that the better the education and income, and public access to information and communication technology, the more likely it is that citizens will engage with their communities. The importance of internet access not just as access to information but also as a communication tool has also been found in 'Net Gains in Political Participation: Secondary Effects of Internet on Community' (Kavanaugh et al 2008). This research showed that even 'politically passive' citizens were found to be more engaged with public access to the internet.

These findings suggest ingredients for best practice in official governance of communities but also what must be provided for citizens themselves in terms of education and access to resources like technologies that enable communication and learning. This research suggests that issues of inequality and access to information should be primary concerns when thinking of the necessary factors for all citizens to participate in their communities.

Limitations and recommendations

This review of the available literature on community participation is extremely brief and therefore should be viewed as a starting point to a more in depth investigation. Furthermore, this briefing mainly focuses on one aspect of community participation, namely that of ways of engaging citizens in 'official' or 'legitimate' forms of participation, from the point of view of local agencies and central government. However, there are many other aspects that deserve close investigation. For example, activism and protest, i.e. participation in unofficial social movements, born out of civil unrest and usually directed against official governance instead of with it. There are countless examples of this kind of community uprising, for example the Frack Off project, a network of local groups campaigning to protect their communities, with the most high profile case probably being in Lancashire, that has fought tirelessly against Cuadrilla Resources and the local council for many years (Frack-Off-Extreme Energy Action Network).

This briefing has also not been able to address psychological aspects of community participation. For example, how attachment to place can play a huge part in engagement, as expressed in 'Finding Common Ground: The Importance of Place Attachment to community participation and planning' (2006). More research into this aspect might prove particularly useful for communities with high migrant populations.

There is a lack of up to date research in all the above aspects of community participation and a noticeable lack

of any research that has documented voices of community members first hand. Qualitative research is needed to discover barriers on a psychological and interpretive level as opposed to cold logistics. This is touched upon in comments that speculate feelings of disempowerment, but without more concrete evidence from further investigation and an interdisciplinary approach this sentiment lacks any real substance.

There is a need for all forms of participation, from official to activist, and all possible reasons for non-participation, from practicalities to the effects of structural inequality and deprivation to be researched and synthesised to gain a more well-rounded understanding.

Conclusion

In order for citizens to engage in their local communities they must feel empowered to do so, by being encouraged, supported and heard by official agencies. Citizens themselves are better equipped to participate when they are satisfied, have access to good education and employment and the technology required to learn and communicate with other community members. These are the foundational requirements to engage citizens in their local communities.

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